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# A Study of the Effect of Online News Consumption on Political Polarization and Deliberative Democracy

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# A Study of the Effect of Online News Consumption on Political Polarization and Deliberative Democracy

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the effect that the Internet and online news consumption has had on American society. It looks first at the number and types of people who use the Web. These are the individuals liable to be impacted by online news consumption. The study then looks at the factors that control Internet users' acquisition of information. These gatekeepers, as they are referred to here, play a role in determining the impact of online news consumption. At last, the study examines what exactly this effect is, showing that homophilous social networks and incivility online have limited the capacity for serious democratic deliberation and contributed to political polarization.

## **Keywords**

online news consumption, political polarization, social media, social networks, gatekeepers

## **Subject Categories**

American Politics | Political Theory | Public Affairs | Social Psychology | Social Psychology and Interaction

**A Study of the Effect of Online News Consumption on Political Polarization and  
Deliberative Democracy**

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## *Chapter 1*

### *Introduction*

Historically, people have obtained news through a limited number of access points. Originally, newspapers were the main source of information. Frankly, the front page of the *New York Times* (or any other major headline) was the clearinghouse for important information. Survey data on newspaper readership bears out the deep penetration of newspapers during the 1970s and 1980s. For over thirty years, the General Social Survey has been asking respondents, “How often do you read the newspaper – every day, a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, or never?”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1970s, approximately six in ten survey participants affirmed that they read the newspaper daily. However, since then, that number has been dropping steadily. In 2006, only 34.2 percent of respondents said they read the newspaper every day. Indeed, more respondents now say they read the newspaper less often. The categories “a few times a week” and “once a week” demonstrate moderate growth. Meanwhile, the number of survey participants saying they read the newspaper “less than once a week” has increased from 3.9 percent in 1972 to 15.8 percent in 2006. The difference in these figures represents four factor growth. Additionally, whereas less than four percent of participants said they never read the newspaper in 1972, by 2006, 12.1 percent of

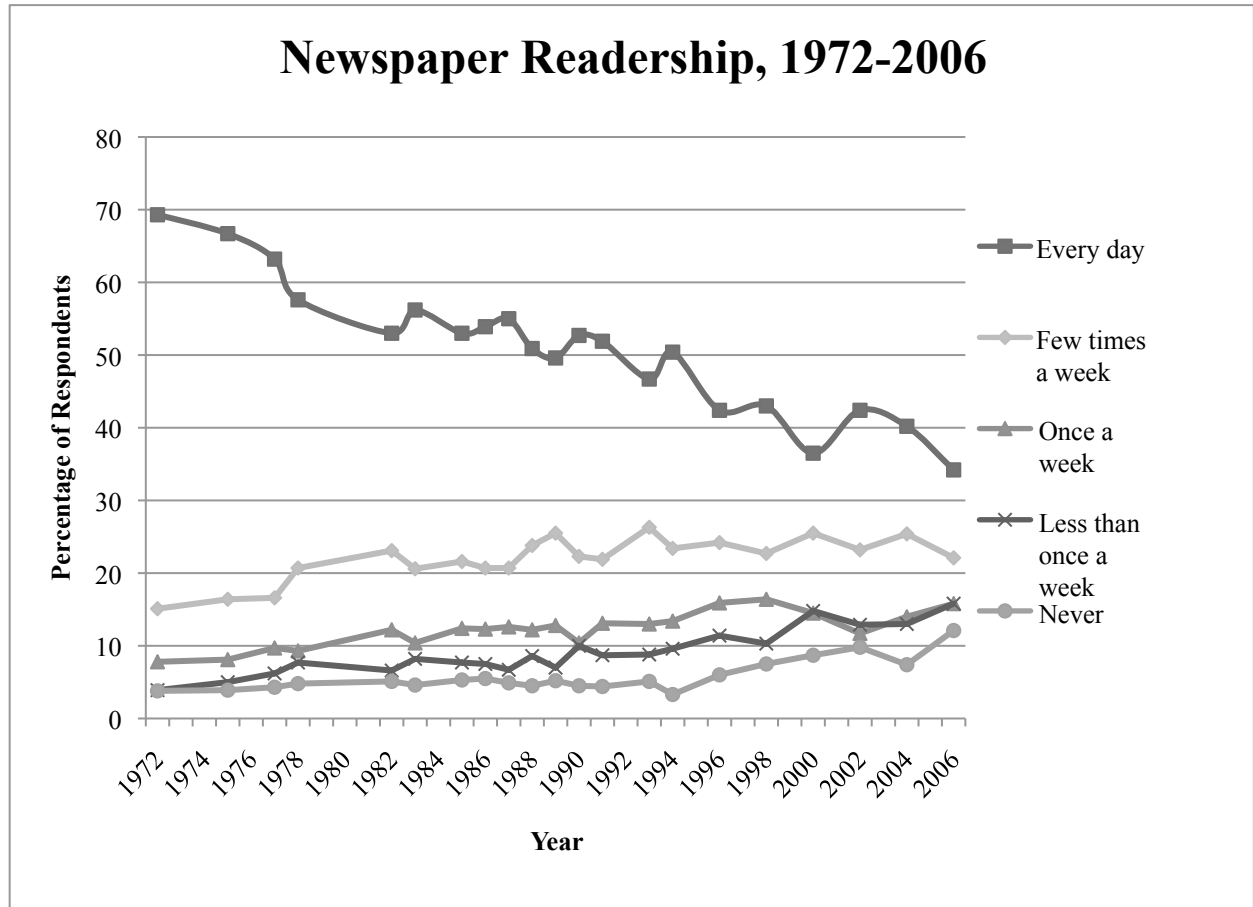
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<sup>1</sup> “The vast majority of GSS data is obtained in face-to-face interviews. Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) began in the 2002 GSS. Under some conditions when it has proved difficult to arrange an in-person interview with a sampled respondent, GSS interviews may be conducted by telephone... From 1972 until 1993, the General Social Survey was administered almost annually. The target sample size for the annual surveys was 1500; actual sample sizes ranged between 1372 (1990) and 1613 (1972). Additionally, there were oversamples of black respondents in 1982 (oversample of 354) and 1987 (oversample of 353). There were no GSSs in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been administered to two samples in even-numbered years, each with a target sample size of 1500, rather than to a single 1500-person sample each year. Total sample sizes for these biennial GSSs range between 2765 (2002) and 2992 (1994). There have been no oversamples during this period” (National Opinion Research Center).

respondents affirmed the same. Figure 1.1 demonstrates the trends in responses over time to this General Social Survey question.

Figure 1.1

This graph depicts the change over time in Americans' newspaper readership.

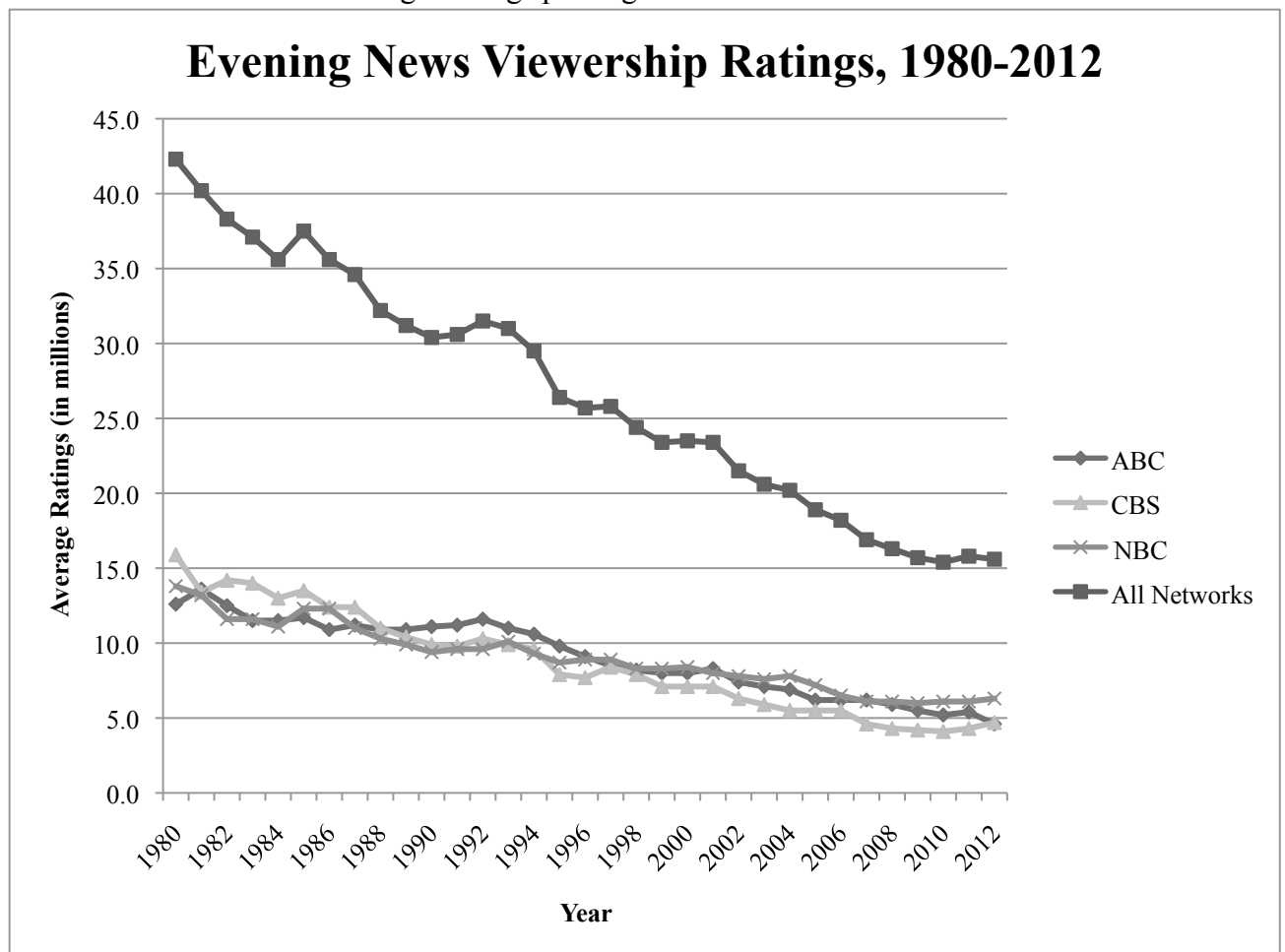


Dataset: General Social Surveys, 1972-2006

As the trends in the figure above demonstrate, over time, people began to turn less to newspapers to access information. The development of different options for acquiring news gave people more choices, and fewer and fewer individuals continued to choose the newspaper. The television, for instance, brought increased opportunity for access. Early on, there were only a few channels available for viewing. People had no choice but to turn on the television and listen to broadcasters like Walter Cronkite present the news. Since then, the media landscape has changed. For one, there are a greater number of

television channels from which viewers can choose. When they get home from work, they do not have to turn on the news. Instead, they may watch a sitcom, sports, a reality show or anything else that strikes their fancy. As a result, viewership of television news has declined. Figure 1.2 shows data collected by Nelson Media Research over the past three decades. It illustrates average ratings for television nightly news programs, taken each year during the month of November. The graph clearly shows a precipitous decline in television news viewership since 1980. Moreover, no program has been immune. ABC, CBS, and NBC all evidence a decline in ratings.

Figure 1.2  
November-to-November Average Ratings per Night



Dataset: Nielson Media Research, used under license; Pew Research Center, 2013 State of the News Media

The data in Figure 1.2 illustrates that the advent of the Internet is not the only force responsible for declining television news viewership. Ratings have been declining steadily since 1980. Still, the Internet has changed the media market. The front page of the newspaper is no longer the arbiter of the important information of the day. Instead, the Internet provides many resources for people's news consumption. Of course, they may check the home page of their preferred newspaper, but they also have the opportunity to read news from providers around the globe. They can directly access statements and releases from individuals and organizations of interest. They can choose among different platforms, too, turning either to well-known sources or less mainstream weblogs, for instance. They can determine what ideology they wish to hear, perhaps engaging in selective exposure to content that confirms their already espoused beliefs. They may even choose the format their news takes. They may read traditional articles, but they can also listen to podcasts, watch video clips, and seek out listicles. Sites like YouTube and BuzzFeed have helped change the format the news takes.

The Internet has also allowed for differences in method of access. People may still seek out particular sources with which they are familiar, much like subscribing to the daily circulation of a print newspaper. However, they can also access content via hyperlinks on sites they are already viewing; these hyperlinks draw them away to different pages. Meanwhile, search engines, such as Google or Yahoo, allow Internet users to direct the retrieval of information without actually having to comb through websites themselves.

Finally, with the advent of the Internet, news information has increasingly taken on a social function (Purcell et al. 2010). "To a great extent, people's experience of news,

especially on the Internet, is becoming a shared social experience as people swap links in emails, post news stories on their social networking site feeds, highlight news stories in their Tweets, and haggle over the meaning of events in discussion threads” (Purcell et al. 2010, p. 2). Every online article from a traditional newspaper source now includes a comments section at the bottom of the page, allowing consumers to respond publicly to the piece, as well as interact with the author and fellow readers. Email and social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, enable users to share links and personal commentary with people they know. Facebook and Twitter in particular allow consumers to reach both close friends and family, as well as people from their extended network of contacts, including coworkers, friends from high school or college, and other general acquaintances. The social function of online news is enabling people to access and engage with news content in novel ways.

### *Thesis*

This paper examines the effect that the Internet and online news consumption has had on American society. It looks first at the number and types of people who use the Web. These are the individuals liable to be impacted by online news consumption. The study then looks at the factors that control Internet users’ acquisition of information. These gatekeepers, as they are referred to here, play a role in determining the impact of online news consumption. At last, the study examines what exactly this effect is, showing that homophilous social networks and incivility online have limited the capacity for serious democratic deliberation and contributed to political polarization.

*Surveys*

The majority of the data analyzed in this study come from two different surveys, both conducted by the Pew Research Center. The first is the Biennial Media Consumption Survey. Conducted every other year by the Pew Center for the People and the Press, this survey includes information on Internet use, going back all the way to the 1990s. Results from these surveys are based on telephone interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of randomly selected American adults. The 2008, 2010, and 2012 surveys form the basis of the research here. The 2008 survey included a nationwide sample of 3,615 adults; the 2010 study relied on a sample of 3,006 adults; and the 2012 survey included 3,003 adults. Interviews for these surveys were conducted via landline and cell phone. Samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC, and these studies were conducted under the direction of the Princeton Survey Research Associates International.

The other primary study that this paper is based upon is the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, a survey being managed by Abt SRBI. This survey is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected Americans. "Respondents who self-identify as Internet users (representing 89% of U.S. adults) participate in the panel via monthly self-administered Web surveys, and those who do not use the Internet participate via telephone or mail" (Duggan et al., 2014, p. 62). Participants were recruited from the Pew Research Center's 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, which included over 10,000 respondents. Of the 9,809 individuals invited to participate in the American Trends Panel, a total of 5,338 chose to do so. 3,308 respondents participated in the first wave of the survey, which was conducted in March through April of 2014. 3,217



participated in the fourth wave of the study, which was conducted in May through June of 2014. Both of these waves are studied here. “Panelists... receive a small monetary incentive after participating in each wave of the survey” (Duggan et al., 2014, p. 62). The American Trends Panel data are weighted in a multi-step process that accounts for selection probability, a participant’s likelihood to join, and partisan identification.

## *Chapter 2: Online Traffic*

### *Internet Use*

The origins of the Internet can be traced to the 1960s. Back then, however, access to the system was limited to academics and scientists in a small number of countries (Hargittai, 2000, p. 236). Not until 1991 was the World Wide Web officially created. Furthermore, the “graphical interface” which makes the Internet accessible to average users was not unveiled until 1993 (Hargittai, 2000, p. 236). The Web is, therefore, a relatively recent phenomenon. Its penetration and widespread use have occurred in less than twenty-five years, which in itself is remarkable. However, during this time, not only have more people begun accessing the Internet, but they are also “spending increasing amounts of time browsing the Web” (Hargittai, 2000, p. 236). The Internet is becoming an important force in people’s lives, affecting basic functions, such as communication and information retrieval. At this point, it is difficult to imagine how society would function without it.

There is still scholarly debate, however, regarding whether or not this increasingly necessary system is actually a force for public good. Some have argued that the Internet holds the potential to revive serious public debate and improve the global system of government. “Proponents of cyberspace promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the way for a democratic utopia. According to them, the alleged decline of the public sphere... will be halted by the democratizing effects of the Internet and its surrounding technologies” (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 10). Internet enthusiasts, thus, maintain that the connectivity offered by the Web will lead to global democracy. Jones (1997) even goes so far as to say that the Web blends “traditional

mythic narratives of progress with strong modern impulses toward self-fulfillment and personal development” (p. 22). According to this idea, the Internet combines the best aspects of ancient societies with the capabilities of today. Not all evaluations are so rosy, however. Some scholars have worried about the potential that the Internet offers for people to become entrenched in their ideological circles and information consumption patterns (Sunstein, 2002). Used in this way, the Web will foster only disagreement and mutual distrust.

The Internet has many functions and potential uses, though, and looking at it as either a force for good or a force for bad ignores the reality that is the World Wide Web. Therefore, in order to “explore the promises and limitations of the Internet,” it is necessary to “deconstruct... the medium into its different facets through which political participation could be enhanced” (Polat, 2005, p. 436). According to Polat (2005), there are three features of the Web, which bear importance for politics. First, the Internet can serve as an “information source” (Polat, 2005, p. 436). It can enable news consumption, for instance, and allow citizens to become more aware of global events. Second, the Internet can function as a “communication medium” (Polat, 2005, p. 436). The Web has the power to connect people to each other through chat rooms, social networking sites, and discussion forums. Thanks to the Internet, geography no longer serves as a barrier to communication. Finally, the Internet has the potential to become “a virtual public sphere” (Polat, 2005, p. 436). In enabling communication, the Internet can serve as a platform for rational public debate on important issues. According to Polat (2005), “what matters here is how opinions are formed rather than how they are expressed” (p. 448). A public sphere can only exist if a variety of opinions are voiced by people of differing stripes and

backgrounds. Coming together, these individuals think critically about the issues facing society and democracy. As John Stuart Mill suggested in *On Liberty*, people use public spheres to dispel false beliefs, extract value from incomplete ideas, and better establish the foundation and rationality of real truths (Mill, 1859). The Internet has the power to be that space for the twenty-first century.

However, this public sphere can only exist if the Web is widely used and accessible. Papacharissi (2002) notes, “Online technologies render participation in the political sphere more convenient, but do not guarantee it. Online political discussions are limited to those with access to computers and the Internet” (p.15). Such accessibility is increasing, but affordability and computer literacy still serve as barriers to widespread use. The following section examines the type of people accessing the Internet. It shows that Web use has grown in a remarkable fashion since the late 1990s. It also examines the demographics of Internet access, showing that geographic location and race/ethnicity have a mild impact on a person’s likelihood of using the Internet, while income, educational background, and age serve as important predictors of such use.

### *Access*

Over the past twenty years, Internet usage has increased over time. Indeed, from the late 1990s through the turn of the century, penetration has made leaps and bounds. In its Biennial Media Consumption Survey, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press asks respondents whether or not they use the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Table 2.1 shows responses

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<sup>2</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press notes, “Since 2004, the online use question has been asked of all respondents (in previous years it was asked only of those who identified themselves as computer users). This modification was made to adjust to changes in technology and means of access to the Internet, and increased the percent who were classified as Internet users by 1-2 percentage points” (Kohut et al., 2008, p. 100). In 2010 and 2012, Pew asked respondents, “Do you use the Internet, at least occasionally?” In 2006 and 2008, Pew asked, “Do you ever go online to access the Internet or to send and receive email?” Meanwhile, “in 2004, 2002, and 2000, the online use question asked, “Do you ever go

from 1996 through 2012. The results are staggering. In 1996, only one in five respondents were Internet users. By 2012, however, eighty-five percent of survey participants said they went online at least occasionally. These figures demonstrate the increased importance of the Internet. Worth noting, however, is the huge jump in reported Internet usage from 2008 to 2010. In 2008, two-thirds of respondents affirmed they access the Internet, but by 2010, approximately four in five surveyed said the same. Those numbers represent fifteen percentage points worth of growth. Unfortunately, the data itself does not provide a definitive reason for this meaningful change in response averages. However, the timing does coincide with the 2007 release of Apple Inc.'s first generation iPhone. Since then mobile telephones and tablets with Internet connectivity have achieved widespread market penetration. Such products have made Internet access more commonplace, and may explain the large increase in reported Internet usage from 2008 to 2010.

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online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive email?" In 1998 and 1996, the question asked, "Do you ever use a computer at work, school, or home to connect with computers over the Internet, the World Wide Web, or with information services such as America Online or Prodigy?" (Kohut et al., 2008, p. 100). It is worth pointing out that "Pew has found that estimates for Internet use are sensitive to placement within a survey and to other content in the questionnaire. The estimate in [the 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey]... was weighted at 67%, the same as in the 2006 media consumption survey. Data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project indicate that there has been little change in overall Internet use since 2006" (Kohut et al., 2008, p. 100).

Table 2.1  
Internet Use, 1996-2012

	Yes	No
1996	21%	79%
1998	36%	64%
2000	54%	46%
2002	62%	38%
2004	66%	34%
2006	67%	33%
2008	67%	33%
2010	82%	18%
2012	85%	15%

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 1996-2012

### *Demographics of Internet Use*

Using responses to the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, the following section attempts to tease apart differences in the demographics of Internet users. Specifically, it looks at participants' reported gender, political ideology, census region, race/ethnicity, income, education, and age. The data suggest that gender and partisan identification have no remarkable effect on a person's likelihood of using the Internet. Geographic location and race/ethnicity are better predictors of whether or not someone goes online. However, the most important factors are income, education level, and age.

Data from the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey indicates that respondents' gender does not appear to have any meaningful impact on their Internet usage. As Table 2.2 evidences, in some years, there are mild discrepancies

between the answers of men and women. Overall, however, the data conform largely to the averages presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.2  
Gender and Internet Use, 2004-2012<sup>3</sup>

	Male	Female
2004	68%	64%
	[949 cases]	[1,100 cases]
2006	67%	66%
	[597 cases]	[747 cases]
2008	67%	67%
	[1,211 cases]	[1,120 cases]
2010	83%	79%
	[1,078 cases]	[1,354 cases]
2012	83%	82%
	[1,178 cases]	[1,320 cases]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

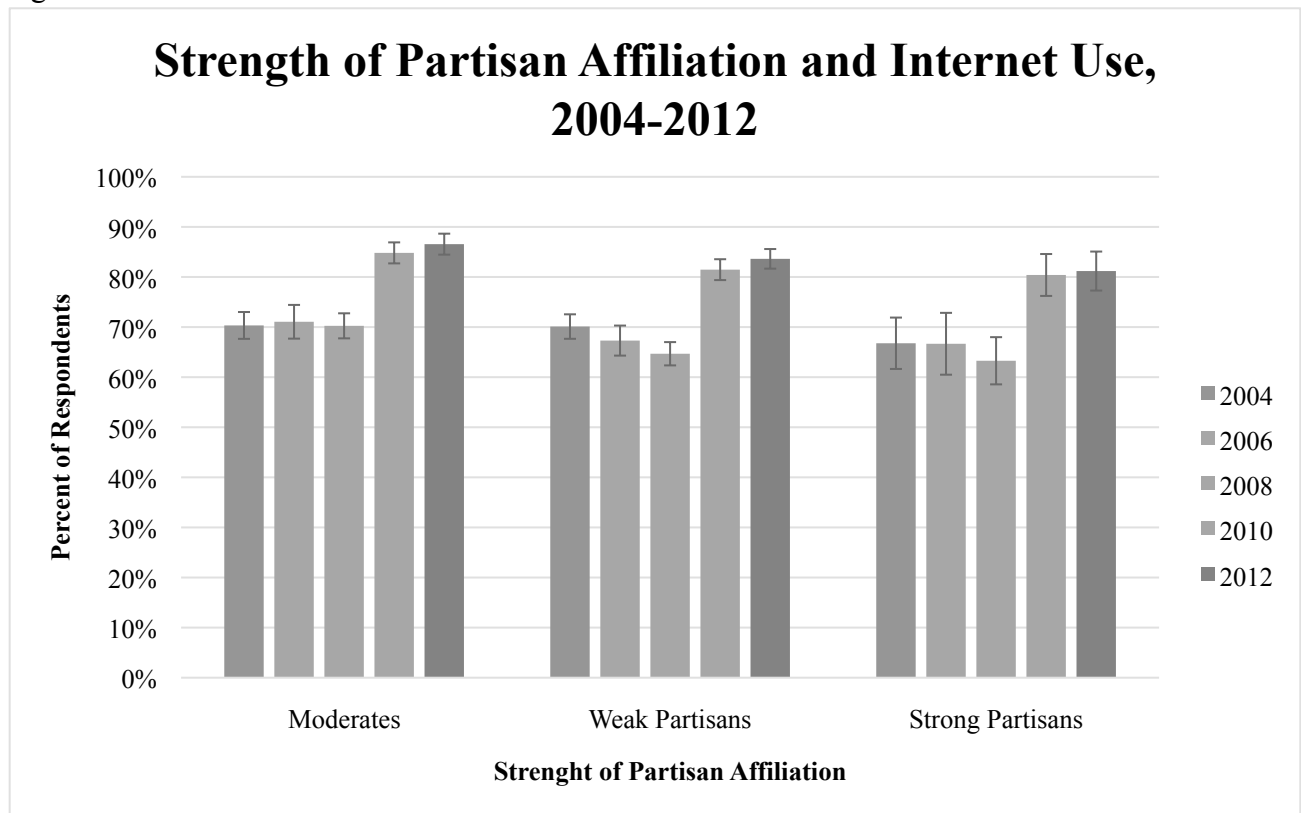
At best, political ideology seems to have a mild impact on Internet penetration. Figure 2.1 examines the strength of partisan affiliations of Internet users. It is concerned not with identification as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent, but rather with the degree of partisan affiliation overall. The extent to which an individual identifies with a particular political party – weakly or strongly – is more pertinent to this study than with which particular party it is that they affiliate. Therefore, the categories included in Figure

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<sup>3</sup> This table and the ones following examine the demographics of Internet use. The percentages included represent the percent of each category that uses the Internet. For instance, here, in 2004, 68% of the men surveyed by the Biennial Media Consumption Survey said that they went online, while 64% of the women surveyed affirmed that they accessed the Internet. As such, the rows do not sum to one hundred. The forthcoming tables follow this pattern.

2.1 include moderate, weak partisans, and strong partisans.<sup>4</sup> The data show that from 2004 to 2012, moderates were, on average, slightly more likely to go online than weak partisans and stronger partisans were. For instance, in 2008, over seven in ten moderates confirmed that they used the Web, while only about sixty-five percent of weak partisans and strong partisans said the same that year. Still, the ninety-five percent confidence intervals<sup>5</sup> included in Figure 2.1 show that the differences in the average responses of moderates, weak partisans, and strong partisans could very well be negligible.

Figure 2.1



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, the graphs on political ideology focus on strength of partisan affiliation, rather than on Democratic or Republican Party allegiance. The same analysis – that the degree of identification is more germane to the topic at hand – is relied upon for those tables and graphs.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the data used in this paper is drawn from populations of small sample sizes. Because of the limited number of survey participants in these pools, there is a measure of uncertainty associated with their averages responses. That being the case, confidence intervals are used in some figures in order to express this degree of uncertainty. Throughout this paper, where confidence intervals are included, they are always ninety-five percent confidence intervals, indicating that the author is ninety-five percent confident that the true average falls somewhere between the interval shown.



Geographic location appears to have a mild influence on Internet penetration. As Table 2.3 shows, Americans from the Northeast and West are slightly more likely to go online than the average respondent is. (Refer back to Table 2.1 for average responses.) Meanwhile, individuals from the South are slightly less likely to access the Internet.

Table 2.3  
Census Region and Internet Use, 2004-2012

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
2004	66%	69%	62%	69%
	[363]	[538]	[706]	[442]
2006	69%	65%	64%	71%
	[254]	[332]	[492]	[266]
2008	69%	67%	64%	70%
	[429]	[614]	[816]	[472]
2010	82%	79%	80%	83%
	[457]	[601]	[934]	[440]
2012	86%	83%	82%	84%
	[438]	[609]	[895]	[556]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

Race seems to have a more meaningful effect on Internet usage. While Internet penetration among white and Hispanic participants generally tracks with averages reported in Table 2.1, responses from African Americans demonstrate that they are much less likely to access the Internet. Table 2.4 records Internet use against race/ethnicity.

Table 2.4  
Race/Ethnicity and Internet Use, 2004-2012

	White, not Hispanic	Black, not Hispanic	Hispanic	Other
2004	66%	61%	66%	78%
	[1,607]	[179]	[140]	[105]
2006	68%	55%	67%	---
	[1,064]	[116]	[76]	---
2008	69%	54%	64%	68%
	[1,846]	[180]	[140]	[132]
2010	83%	65%	82%	85%
	[1,881]	[203]	[157]	[155]
2012	85%	77%	77%	87%
	[1,860]	[215]	[235]	[142]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012  
Data for the "Other" category was unavailable in 2006.

Respondents' income shows a pronounced effect on their likelihood to use the Internet. The 2004 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys demonstrate that the wealthier a survey participant is, the more likely he or she is to go online. From 2004 to 2008, approximately four in five of respondents earning \$50,000 or more a year confirmed accessing the Internet. These figures represent a meaningful departure from the averages shown in Table 2.1. Furthermore, in 2010 and 2012, close to a hundred percent of respondents making over \$75,000 per year said they used the Internet. These numbers again represent a large upward departure from the mean number of respondents using the Internet. On the other end of the spectrum, however, less wealthy participants are much less likely to use the Internet. From 2004 through 2008, less than half of

respondents making under \$20,000 a year said they used the Internet. Indeed, Internet penetration among people making under \$20,000 per year seems to lag seriously behind reported averages. The \$30,000 to under \$40,000 income bracket seems to best track the mean evidenced in Table 2.1. Table 2.5 compares Internet use with reported income levels. In addition to straight averages, it evidences growth over time in Internet penetration. While individuals making over \$40,000 per year demonstrate a greater likelihood to go online from the beginning, their growth from 2004 to 2012 is relatively unimpressive. For instance, the average response of individuals in the categories making \$50,000 to under \$75,000, \$100,000 to under \$150,000, and \$150,000 or more all increased by only eight percentage points from 2004 to 2012. Granted, none of these groups had much room to grow. Still, the lower income brackets demonstrate a much more remarkable change over time. For example, the average number of respondents making between \$20,000 to under \$30,000 saying that they accessed the Internet grew by twenty nine percentage points. Even more meaningful, the mean percent of those making less than \$10,000 going online more than doubled, increasing by thirty-six percentage points. Therefore, although Internet use among lower income participants does lag behind penetration among more wealthy individuals, the former group is catching up quickly.

Table 2.5  
Income Bracket and Internet Use, 2004-2012

	Less than \$10,000	\$10,000 to under \$20,000	\$20,000 to under \$30,000	\$30,000 to under \$40,000	\$40,000 to under \$50,000	\$50,000 to under \$75,000	\$75,000 to under \$100,000	\$100,000 to under \$150,000	\$150,000 or more
2004	30%	43%	52%	65%	76%	83%	86%	89%	87%
	[53]	[124]	[172]	[225]	[226]	[370]	[277]	[201]	[134]
2006	---	42%	59%	64%	73%	79%	84%	87%	89%
	---	[62]	[114]	[117]	[136]	[248]	[187]	[152]	[114]
2008	41%	44%	53%	66%	71%	80%	85%	88%	85%
	[67]	[107]	[140]	[185]	[184]	[403]	[360]	[311]	[232]
2010	54%	60%	78%	83%	90%	92%	95%	97%	93%
	[98]	[159]	[194]	[218]	[204]	[404]	[337]	[275]	[199]
2012	66%	67%	81%	87%	87%	91%	96%	97%	95%
	[140]	[187]	[228]	[206]	[210]	[380]	[342]	[269]	[201]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012  
Data for the "Less than \$10,000" category was unavailable in 2006.

Likewise, education level evidences a marked impact on Internet penetration. The 2004 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys show that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to use the Internet. From 2004 through 2012, roughly four in five respondents who have received some amount of college education said they access the Internet. Furthermore, in 2010 and 2012, ninety-five percent of participants with a bachelor's degree or more affirmed that they go online. Meanwhile, less educated respondents were seriously less likely to use the Internet. From 2004 to 2010, less than half of respondents without a high school diploma said that they accessed the Internet. Even participants who did graduate high school remain less likely to use the Internet than

the average respondent to the Biennial Media Consumption Survey is. (Refer back to Table 2.1 for average responses.) College attendance, therefore, seems to play an important role in influencing Internet penetration. Table 2.6 tracks Internet use against education level.

Table 2.6  
Education Level and Internet Use, 2004-2012

	Less than high school	High school graduate	Some college	College +
2004	27%	56%	80%	88%
	[74]	[519]	[578]	[874]
2006	30%	57%	78%	86%
	[40]	[334]	[389]	[572]
2008	29%	54%	78%	89%
	[67]	[518]	[581]	[1,154]
2010	43%	73%	90%	95%
	[81]	[637]	[676]	[1,030]
2012	62%	76%	86%	95%
	[79]	[595]	[704]	[1,031]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

Finally, age has, perhaps, one of the most pronounced impacts on Internet usage. Responses to the 2004 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys demonstrate that older people are much less likely to browse the Web. For instance, in 2004, less than a quarter of individuals in the sixty-five and older age bracket said that they accessed the Internet. In comparison with the sixty-six percent average of that year, this figure evidences a general lack of Internet usage among older Americans. Meanwhile, the

eighteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-four, thirty-five to forty-four, and forty-five to fifty-four age brackets all consistently demonstrate greater than average Internet penetration. Particularly noteworthy is the similarity in responses among the younger three age brackets. Among people aged eighteen to forty-four, Internet penetration appears roughly similar. Table 2.7 depicts the importance of age with regard to Internet usage. Like Table 2.5, it evidences a difference in growth over time for each of the brackets. Internet penetration among younger people grows much more slowly from 2004 to 2012 than for older respondents during that same time period. For instance, the average number of people aged twenty-five to thirty-four using the Internet grows by only thirteen percentage points during the time period covered. Meanwhile, the mean of adults over sixty-five going online increases by forty-two percentage points from 2004 to 2012. Internet penetration among older respondents is, thus, catching up with that of younger people.

Table 2.7  
Age Group and Internet Use, 2004-2012

	Age 18-24	Age 25-34	Age 35-44	Age 45-54	Age 55-64	Age 65+
2004	82%	81%	77%	71%	59%	24%
	[267]	[366]	[486]	[437]	[292]	[172]
2006	78%	82%	80%	72%	59%	28%
	[124]	[206]	[292]	[322]	[232]	[140]
2008	79%	78%	78%	71%	61%	33%
	[252]	[351]	[451]	[521]	[429]	[279]
2010	96%	95%	92%	82%	77%	49%
	[301]	[349]	[323]	[506]	[511]	[407]
2012	96%	94%	96%	88%	82%	66%
	[280]	[318]	[361]	[454]	[483]	[546]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

The demographic data provided above illustrate a few key ideas. For one, gender does not appear to have a meaningful impact on whether or not a respondent uses the Internet. Partisan identification, geographic location, and race/ethnicity does have at least some effect on an individual's probability of going online. The most important predictors of Internet usage, however, are age, income level, and education amount. Given then that relatively young, educated, and affluent people are the ones accessing the Internet, it would seem likely that these would be the same individuals going online to receive news. Later on, this idea will be explored further.

### *Websites Visited*

The results from the Biennial Media Consumption Surveys evidence the increasing penetration of the Internet. However, online access does not automatically

translate into media consumption. There are many other types of websites that a user may choose to access, and just because people can get news online and even do get news online does not mean that that is what they primarily do when surfing the Web. Indeed, it is useful to keep online news consumption in perspective.

In *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Matthew Hindman (2009), among other things, attempts to answer the question, “Where do people go online? (p. 58). In order to do so, he uses a sample, which includes traffic for over a million Web sites, as provided by Hitwise Competitive Intelligence, “a firm that partners with large Internet service providers to collect and analyze Internet traffic” (Hindman, 2009, p. 59). Before engaging in any analysis, Hindman (2009) notes that “Hitwise’s primary measure of traffic is the number of ‘visits’ a site receives,” and while this metric is not the best way to examine the importance of given Web sites, no other dataset draws from such a wide swath of the American public (p. 60). Ultimately, the dataset demonstrates that online news consumption is relatively unremarkable in comparison with the general traffic patterns of the Web. Approximately a tenth of Internet use is devoted to checking email, while another tenth goes toward adult content. Seven percent of traffic is directed toward search engines, like Google or Yahoo. Meanwhile, “only 2.9 percent of Web traffic goes to news and media sites. These facts alone tell us much about citizens’ priorities in cyberspace” (Hindman, 2009, p. 60-61). Other Web traffic does not break down as neatly into categories of content, but of such unclassified sites, the most popular include MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, PayPal, dating sites, and online banking pages (Hindman, 2009, p. 62).



Such background helps provide a true understanding of the relative important of media consumption online. Frankly, it makes up only a small percent of total Internet use. That said, given the incredible volume of Internet traffic, three percent is actually quite large in absolute terms. Assuming that Web traffic can be represented as persons,<sup>6</sup> it is possible to determine how many Americans this number encompasses. In 2007, the year during which Hindman's Hitwise data were collected, the total U.S. population stood at 301,621,157 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Additionally, according to the Biennial Media Consumption Survey, sixty-seven percent of people were accessing the Internet at that time. Multiplying these figures, it is found that three percent of Web traffic equates to almost six million Americans.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, given that this figure represents so many people, it seems worthwhile to study who exactly is choosing to access news in this way and what the consequences of that choice are.

### *Social Networking Sites*

While online news platforms drew a relatively small percent of Web traffic, social networking sites were among the biggest attracters of Internet users, according to Hindman's Hitwise data (Hindman, 2009, p. 62). People rely on these sites to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances. They can share information about themselves and – more importantly for this study – the world and events around them. Social networking sites enable and encourage the social function of news. Indeed, they can drive traffic to online news content, contributing to the three percent of traffic directed toward Internet news information. Moreover, social networking sites serve as public forums.

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<sup>6</sup> This is admittedly a large assumption, but it is used to illustrate a point about the importance of online news consumption in absolute terms. It is not meant to be taken as a scholarly statement about how the Internet is used and how online news consumption actually takes place.

<sup>7</sup>  $301,621,157 \times 0.67 \times 0.029 = 5,860,499.081$

They are the spaces where users have the ability to discuss and debate topics and ideas, just as Papacharissi (2002) and Polat (2005) suggested. Of course, not all Americans, and not even all Internet users, have a profile on these sites, and as before, the quality of deliberation that occurs here is contingent upon the variety of backgrounds and opinions included in the debate. The following section examines the increasing popularity of social networking sites. It shows that since 2008, there has been a remarkable increase in use of social networking sites. It also discusses the demographics of social networking site users because given that these are the people available for participation in debate on these public forums, it is worth understanding who they are. Responses to the Biennial Media Consumption Survey show that they are mostly young.

#### *Access*

Since Hindman's examination of patterns of Web traffic, social networking sites seem to have only become more important. From 2008 on, the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey has tracked respondents' use of social networking sites.<sup>8</sup> Table 2.8 shows that the number of Internet users with a profile on a social networking site doubled from 2008 to 2012. Responses to the first wave of the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel demonstrate that growth in social networking site use has continued through 2014, as well. There, survey participants were asked to identify the social networking sites to which they subscribe.<sup>9</sup> Although American Trends

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<sup>8</sup> In the 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey, the Pew Research Center asked respondents, "Do you have a profile on MySpace, Facebook, or another social networking site, or not?" In 2010, respondents were asked, "Have you ever created your own profile on any social networking site like MySpace, Facebook, or LinkedIn, or haven't you done this?" Finally, in 2012, Pew asked, "Do you ever use social networking sites, such as Facebook, Google Plus, or LinkedIn, or not?" These questions are asked separate of those regarding Twitter. However, for the purposes of this paper, Twitter is considered a social networking site.

<sup>9</sup> In the first wave of the American Trends Panel, the Pew Research Center asked web respondents to "click on the social networking sites that you use. You can click the logo or the button itself to check the

Panel respondents were allowed to check off multiple sites, thereby making it impossible to know the total number of social networking site users, the data show that at least seventy-seven percent of web respondents subscribe to at least one social networking site. Table 2.9 depicts this information. The responses to both the Biennial Media Consumption Survey and the American Trends Panel make clear that social networking site penetration has increased rapidly over the past decade or so. In 2008, a third of Internet users had profiles on social networking sites. In 2014, over three-quarters did.

Table 2.8  
Social Networking Site Usage Among Internet Users, 2008-2012

	Yes	No
2008	32%	68%
	[746]	[1,585]
2010	55%	45%
	[1,361]	[1,113]
2012	63%	37%
	[1,616]	[949]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Table 2.9  
Social Networking Site Usage Among Web Respondents, 2014

Facebook	77%
YouTube	63%
Google Plus	24%
LinkedIn	25%
Twitter	21%

Dataset: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel Wave 1

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button.” It is important to note that the “percentages [shown here] add up to more than 100% because multiple answers were accepted” (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 60).

Social networking sites function by connecting users to people they know or want to know. Different sites have different purposes. For instance, LinkedIn is primarily intended for professional purposes, while Twitter allows its users to share ideas, jokes, and news (as long as it is 140 characters or fewer) with the people who “follow” them. However, all social networking sites allow users to both create their own individual profile and view those of others. Of importance to the analysis here is the posting function, which allows people to, among other things, share content, such as news articles and clips. Algorithms on Twitter and Facebook even isolate the hyperlinks and topics that are trending among users, so that everyone can see what is popular on any given day. Such functions bear important implications for online news consumption. Therefore, it is worth examining what special characteristics define subscribers to social networking sites.

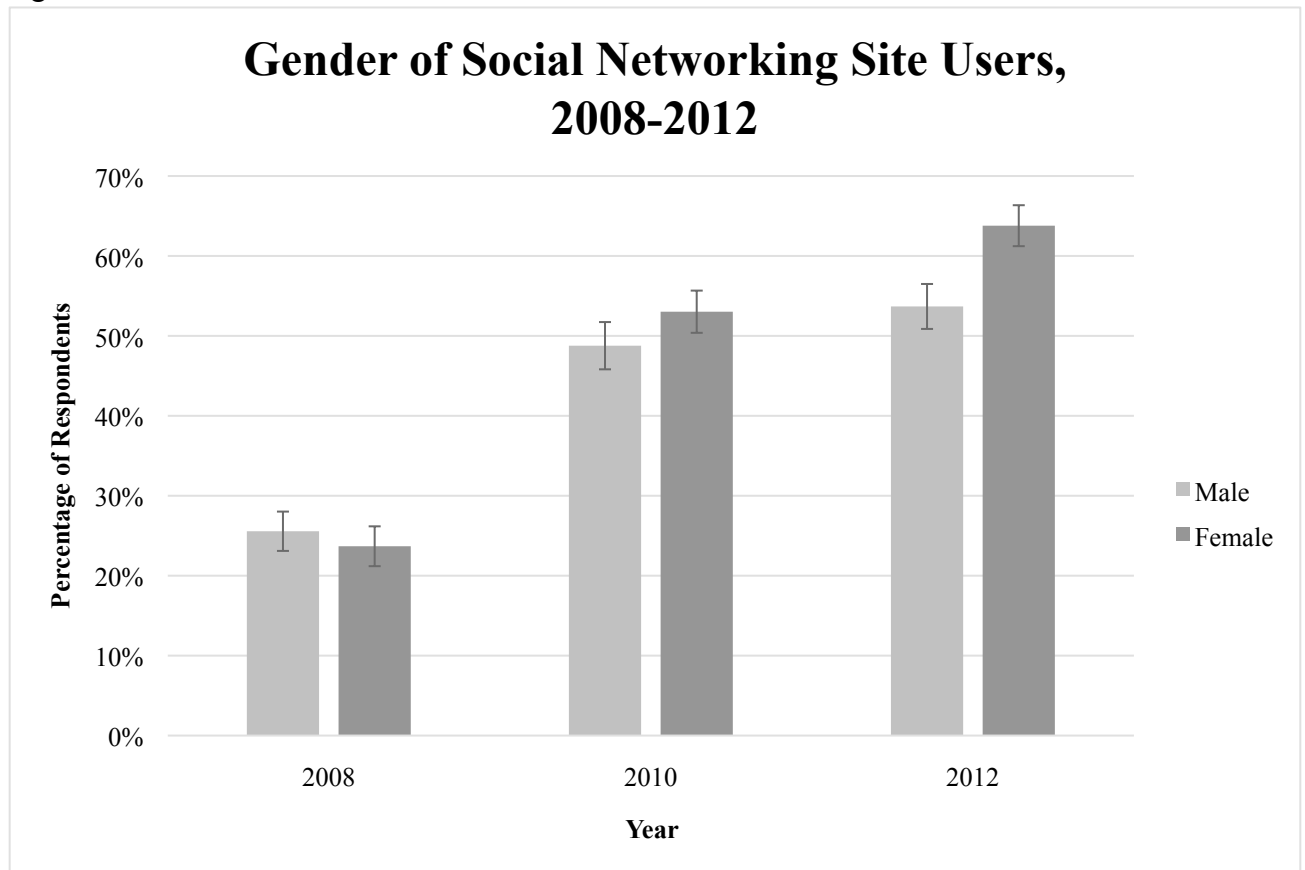
#### *Demographics of Social Networking Site Use*

Using responses to the Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey, the following section attempts to tease apart differences in the demographics of social networking site users. It shows that gender, race/ethnicity, income bracket, and partisan identification all have some impact on an Internet user’s likelihood of having a profile on a social networking site. The best predictors of social networking site use are education level and age, however.

While gender does not seem to have an impact on Internet use, responses to the 2008 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys evidence differences between men and women with respect to social networking site use. Figure 2.2 shows the percent of men and women, respectively, who have social networking accounts. In 2008, men

were slightly more likely to have a profile on a social networking site than women were, though the ranges of the ninety-five percent confidence intervals included suggest that the difference is negligible. In 2010, women were more likely to have a social networking page, though, again, the confidence intervals indicate that the discrepancy could be negligible. By 2012, however, women were much more likely than men to say that they used social networking sites. Close to sixty-five percent of women affirmed having a page, while only fifty-five percent of men said the same. The confidence intervals show that the discrepancy in response averages represents a genuine difference between men and women. It is unclear what accounts for this fact.

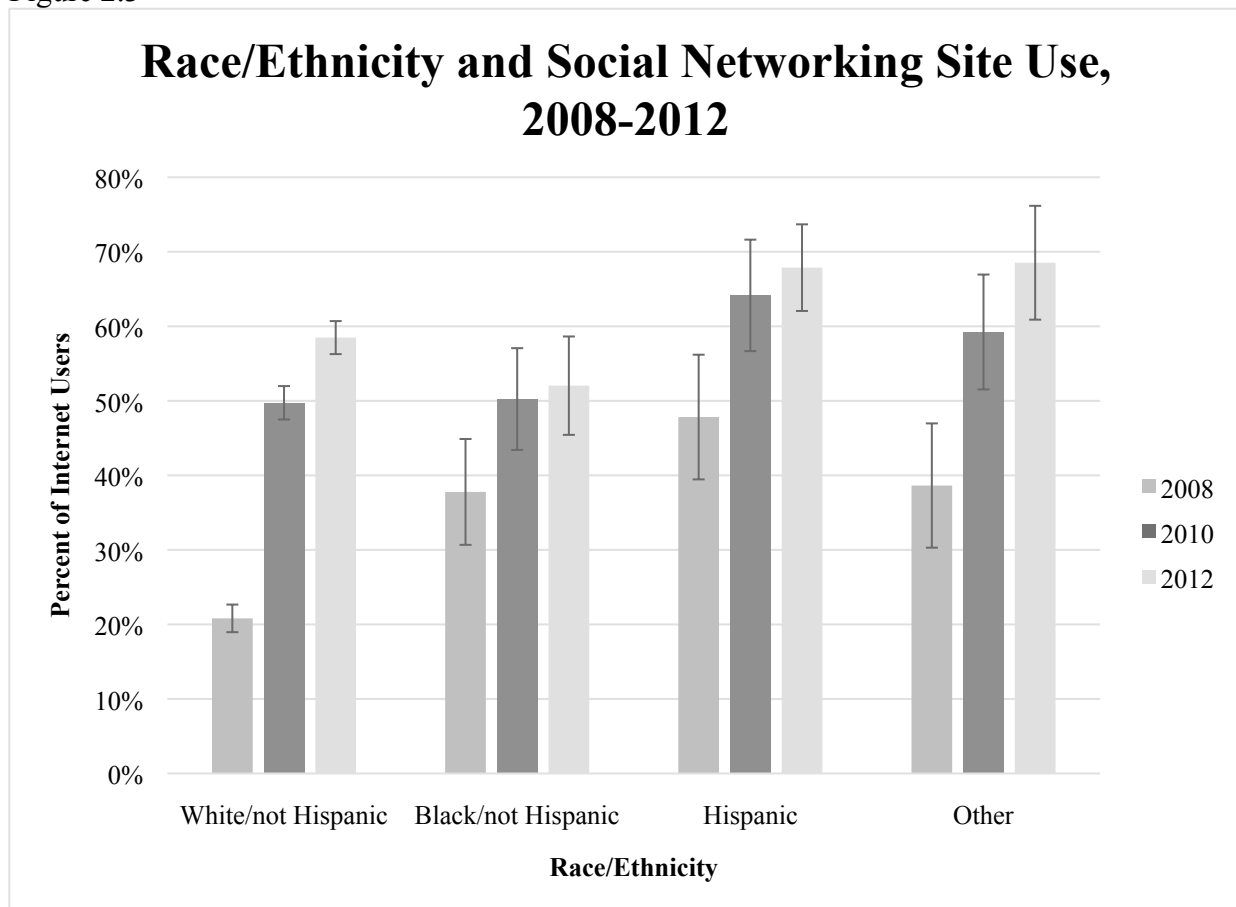
Figure 2.2



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Race also seems to have an impact on use of social networking sites. In 2008, African Americans and Hispanics were much more likely to say they had a social networking page than white respondents. The ninety-five percent confidence intervals included in Figure 2.3 even show that these differences are not negligible. For example, the upper end for white people is some fifteen percentage points below the lower end for Hispanic respondents. By 2010, those who identify as white appear to have caught up with black respondents, though Hispanics are still much more likely to say that they use social networking sites. In 2012, most of the data seem to conform, though the average Hispanic is still much more likely to have a social networking page than the average white or black person.

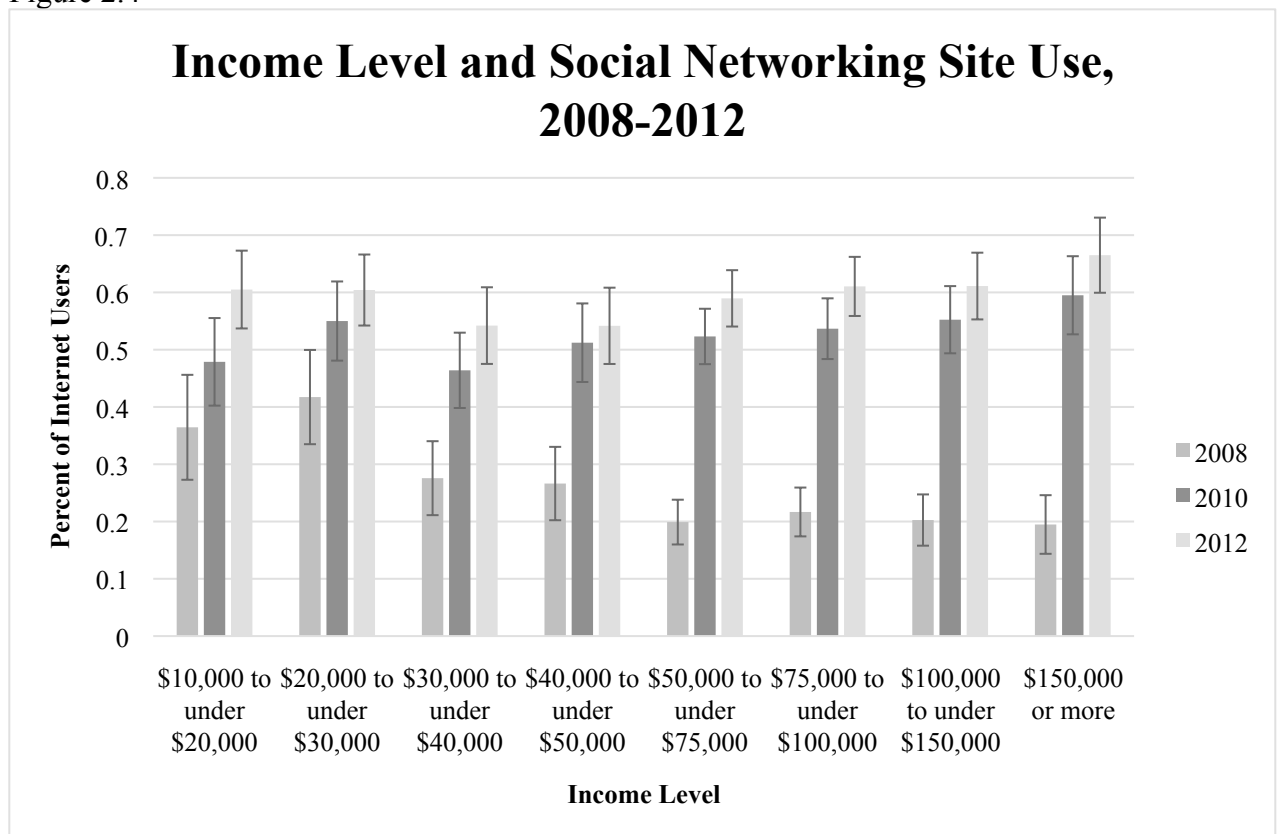
Figure 2.3



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Income also appears to have an effect on Internet users' tendency to have a social networking profile. Figure 1.4 shows that in 2008, individuals making less than \$30,000 were actually much more likely than their wealthier peers to use social networking sites. In fact, there is no overlap between the lower limit of the confidence intervals for these individuals with the upper threshold of the confidence intervals for people making over \$50,000. By 2010 and 2012, the responses for all of the categories appear to be roughly similar, with overlap among all confidence intervals included. Perhaps, the differences evidenced in 2008 could actually be a function of age. As Figure 1.8 shows, young people are more likely to say they have social networking pages. As young people generally make less money than older, more established professionals, the discrepancies evidenced in Figure 2.4 could simply be tapping age.

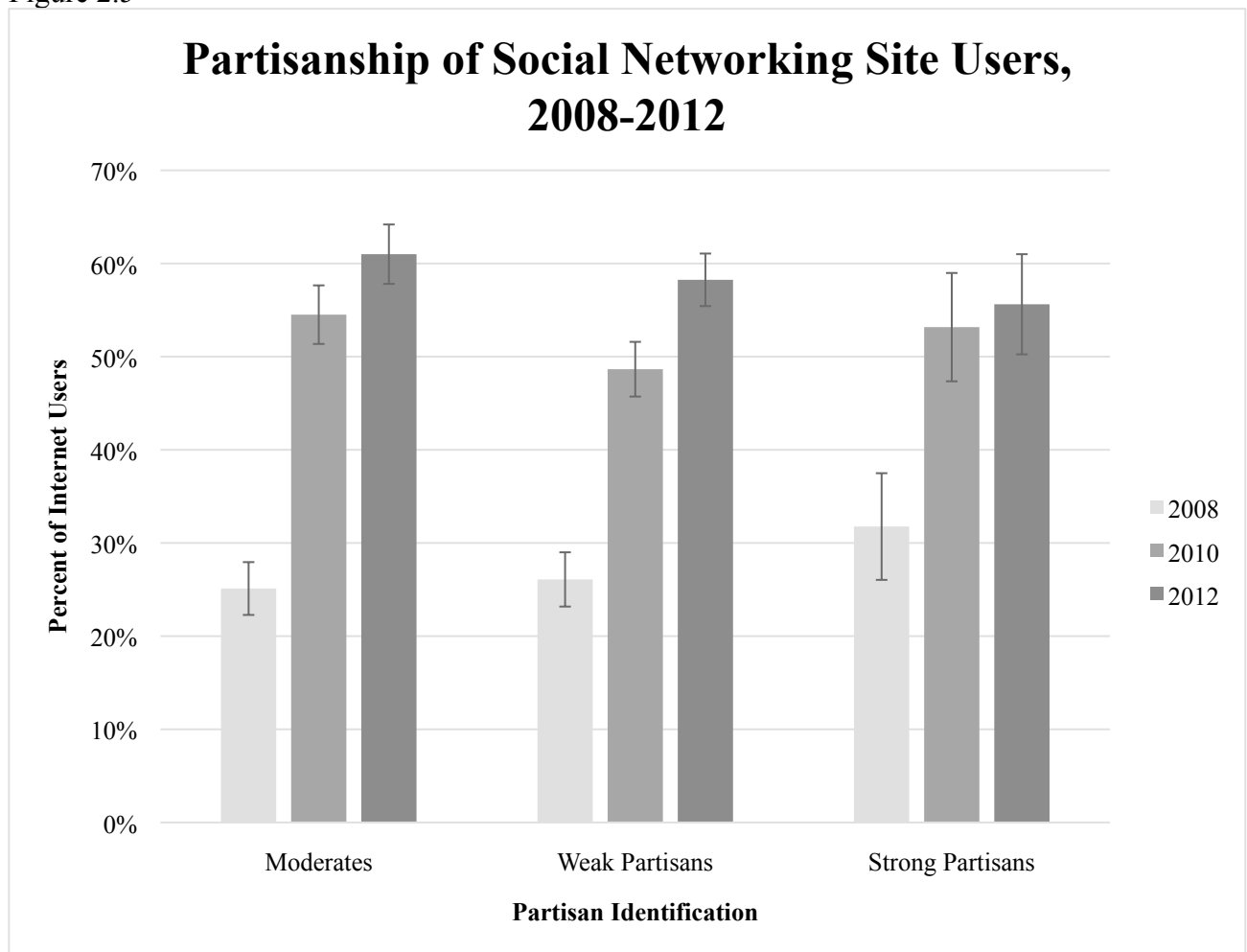
Figure 2.4



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Partisanship also seems to have a mild impact on social networking site use. Figure 2.5 examines the percent of each partisan identifier who affirm having a social networking page. In 2008, strong partisans were slightly more likely to say they use social networking sites. Roughly a third of them affirmed they had a social media profile, while only a quarter of moderates and of weak partisans said the same. By 2010, moderates and strong partisans were on average more likely to have a social networking profile than weak partisans were. Finally, in 2012, the average moderate had the highest probability of using a social networking site. Still, the confidence intervals included indicate that the differences discussed here could be negligible.

Figure 2.5

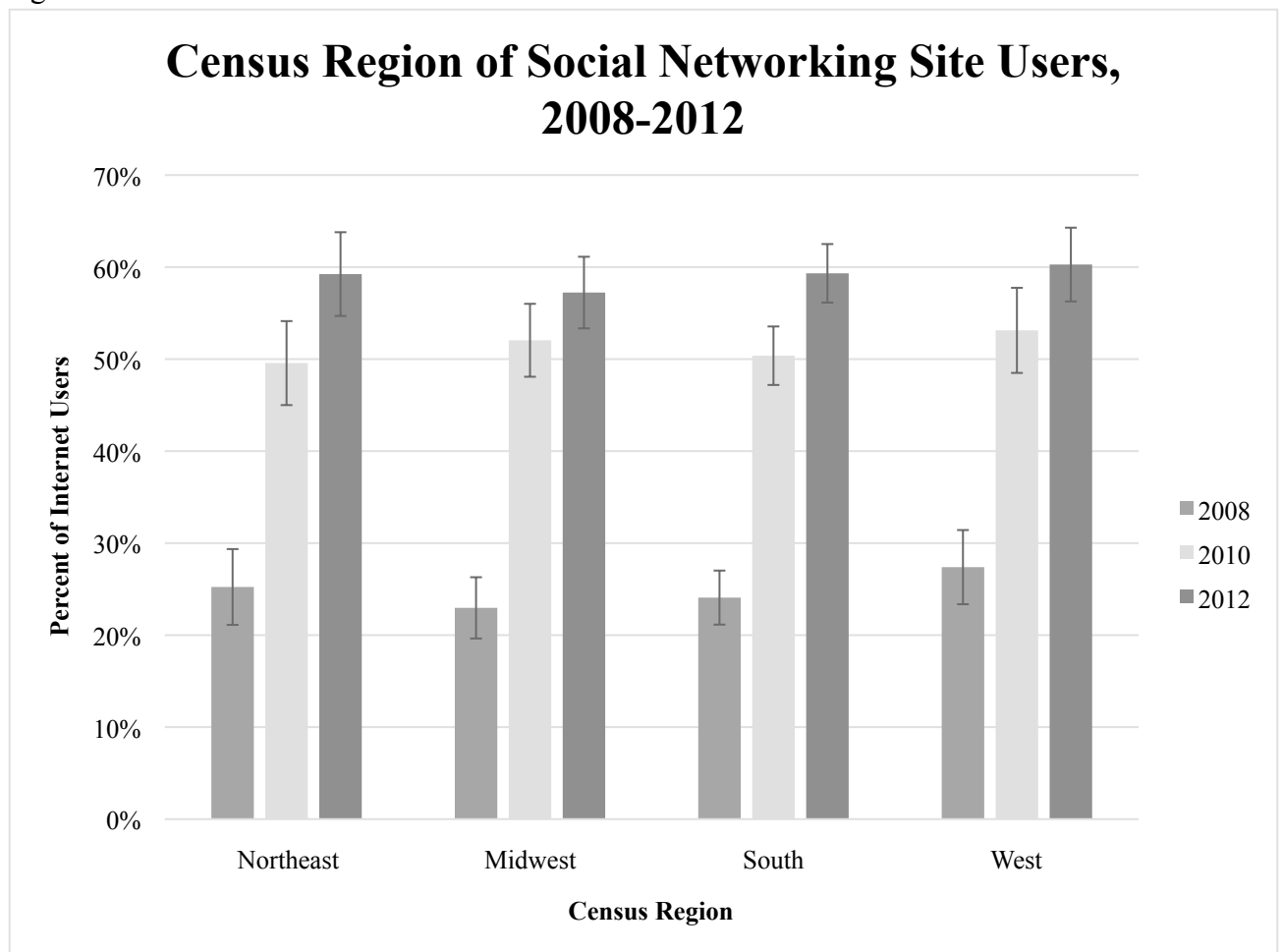


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012



Respondents' geographic location does not appear to have any meaningful impact on their Internet usage. As Figure 2.6 evidences, in some years, there are mild discrepancies among people, as broken down by census region. However, these differences represent only a few percentage points, and overall, the data are roughly similar across geographic region. Moreover, the confidence intervals included all overlap to a substantial degree.

Figure 2.6

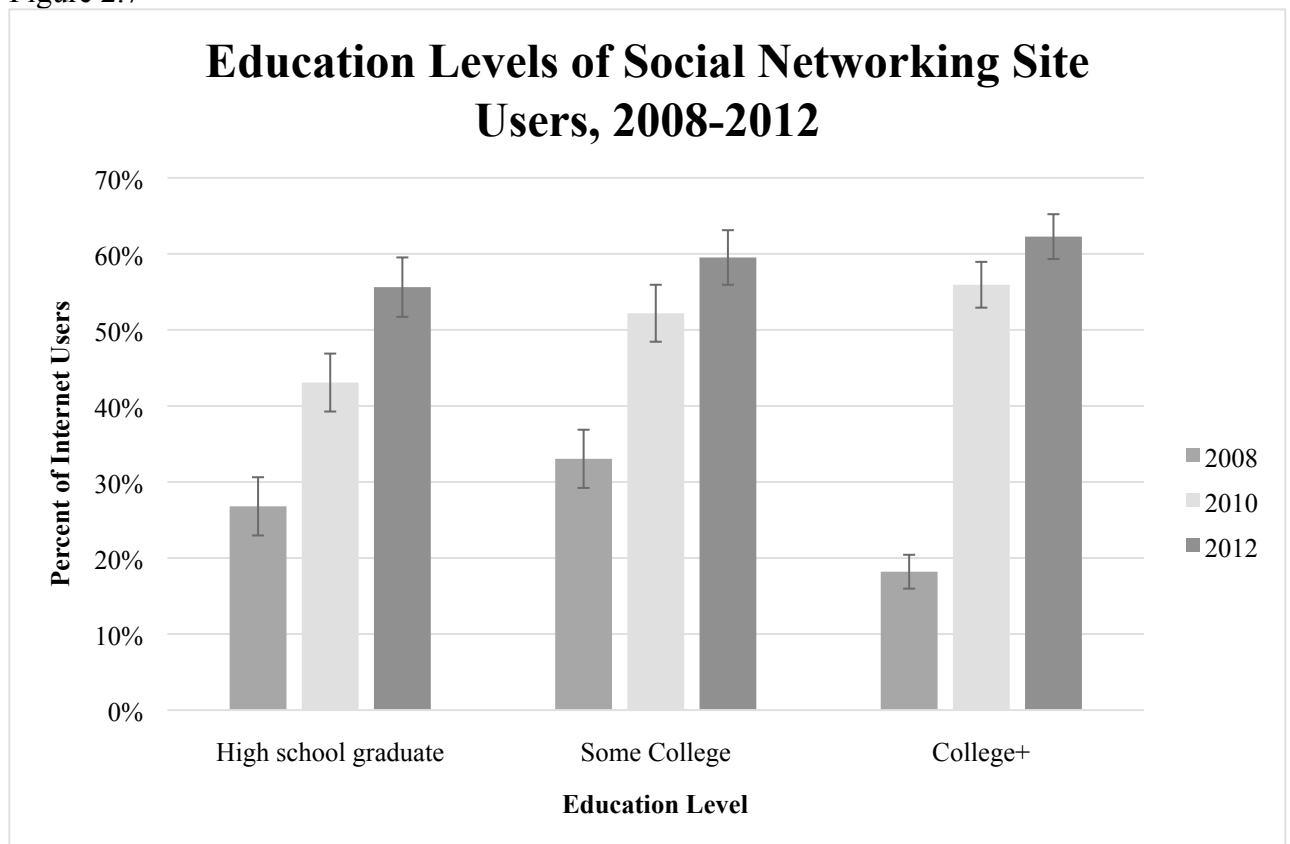


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Meanwhile, education level appears to have a slightly more meaningful impact on social networking site penetration. As Figure 2.7 evidences, in some years, there are rather serious discrepancies between the answers given by people with a college diploma

or more and those given by the rest of the participants surveyed. In 2008, fewer than one in five respondents with at least a Bachelor's degree said they have a profile on a social networking site. Meanwhile, over a quarter of high school graduates and about a third of those with some college training said the same. In 2010 and 2012, however, of the three categories, individuals with a college degree were the most likely to have social networking profiles. It is unknown what is the true cause behind these differences. However, it could again be a product of age. Young people are generally less well educated, simply because they have yet to finish school, and since they are the ones most likely to be on social networking sites, as is shown in Figure 2.8, the data here may be tapping that issue. The fact that the "some college" category was the most likely to be on social networking sites in 2008 provides at least some support for this idea.

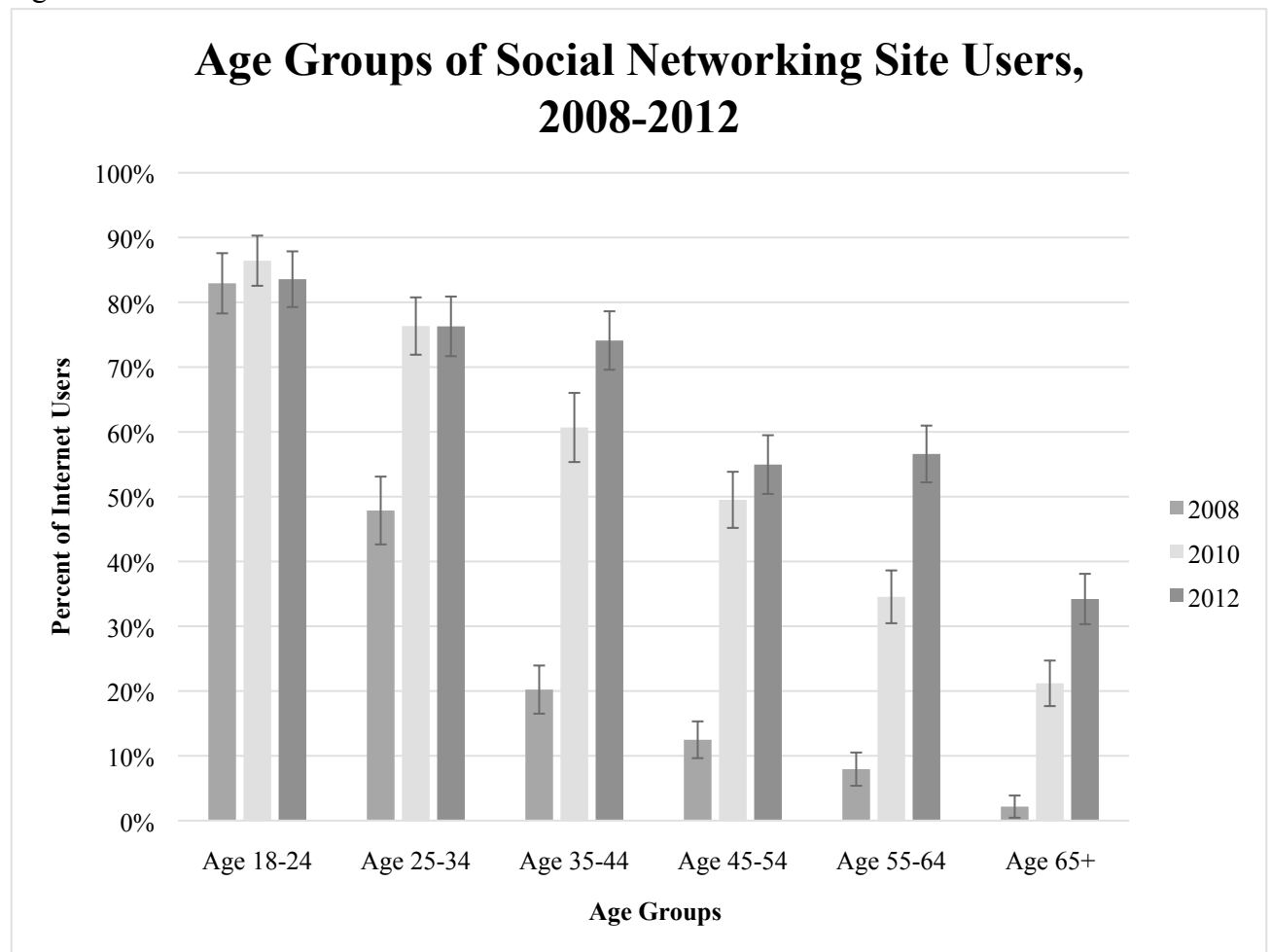
Figure 2.7



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

As hinted at already, age appears to be the best predictor for assessing an Internet users' probability of having a social networking profile. Responses to the 2008 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys demonstrate that younger people are much more likely to have created a profile on a social networking site. For instance, for 2008 to 2012, more than four out of five people aged eighteen to twenty-four consistently respond that they use social networking sites. Meanwhile, the twenty-five to thirty-four and thirty-five to forty-four age demographics show steady, above average growth in social networking site usage, too. Only respondents over sixty-five years of age show little to no social networking site use whatsoever. In 2008, only two percent of such individuals said they used social networking sites and by 2012, that number had only grown to a third. However, as with Internet usage, these categories of older individuals also evidence the most change over time. Initially slower to adapt to such new technologies, older Americans are increasingly creating social networking profiles. Figure 2.8 provides a visual illustration of the significance of age with respect to the use of social networking sites.

Figure 2.8



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

The demographic data discussed above visually depict a few important facts. Almost every category analyzed seemed to have an impact on a given respondent's likelihood of having a profile on a social networking site. The only factor that was not a meaningful predictor of social networking site use was census region. Meanwhile, gender, race/ethnicity, income level, and partisan identification all had some predictive power. Education and, most importantly, age were the best determinants of an individual's probability of having a social networking profile. The younger a respondent was, the more likely he or she was to have subscribed to a social networking site.

*Conclusion*

The preceding chapter has attempted to understand what characteristics define the people going online and using social networking sites. These are the individuals available for participation in public deliberation on important issues. These are the ones who make up the public sphere. These are also the people liable to be affected by the content they encounter. In the forthcoming discussion of polarization and engagement, these are the Americans being made reference to. Of course, they do not just access online content randomly. There are a number of forces that contribute to whether or not they see information that has the power to impact their beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. Chapter 3 looks at what these factors are, as they help determine what ultimately happens to the people already analyzed here.

### *Chapter 3: Online News Consumption*

#### *News Consumption and Gatekeepers*

Much like the U.S. government, the news information space is not a pure democracy. Not all information is created equal, and a number of factors coalesce in determining the exposure of certain news sources and stories. In order to reach the broader public, information must pass through a series of hurdles. At each of these points is a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers earn the moniker because they control or, at the very least, play a role in determining, whether people view specific content. Given the vast amounts of data potentially available to the public, the gatekeeping function is an important one with broad implications. It builds on the two-step flow of communication model first developed in the 1940s by sociologists associated with Columbia University. According to this theory, information reaches the public by way of opinion leaders. These opinion leaders are influenced by the news media and, in turn, relay what they have read or heard to those within their social network (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Other studies built on this idea (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, 1957), but the explanation developed here also relies on past research regarding the way news professionals perform their jobs. Gatekeeping is not just a product of the opinion leaders in one's life. For one, before an opinion leader can learn about the significant events of the day, newspaper editors (White, 1950; Snider, 1967) and journalists (Flegel & Chafee, 1971) must determine which stories are newsworthy. Therefore, Shoemaker et al. (2001) define gatekeeping as "the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into the few that are actually transmitted by the news media" (p. 233).

In the age of the Internet, however, gatekeeping is even more than just news professionals determining what they deem worthy of publication. The structure of the Web itself actually plays a role in affecting what people see. “Navigational sites” have the power to channel individuals’ content acquisition “by offering various services that enable users to find their way through the enormous amount of material on the Web” (Hargittai, 2000, p. 237-238). Additionally, hyperlinks are “an exercise in the gatekeeping function” by allowing sites to direct and control users’ navigations” (Dimitrova et al., 2003, p. 409). That said, gatekeeping online largely mirrors gatekeeping offline. In their study of Twitter conversations related to Austrian politics, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) found that “political professionals [still] talk amongst themselves, and the gap between them and the public will not be bridged unless they want it to be” (p. 292). Thus, as with offline interactions, elites continue to control and direct information on new online platforms, such as Twitter. The “central actors” in serious political debate on the Internet remain “journalists, experts, and politicians” (Ausserhoffer & Maireder, 2013, p. 309). The only real difference is that during niche issue discussions, bloggers take on a kind of elite, gatekeeping function (Ausserhoffer & Maireder, 2013, p. 309). The online space, like the offline space, continues to be dominated and controlled by opinion leaders, as first suggested by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948). Indeed, according to Hindman (2009), “a small set of winners... receive the lion’s share of the traffic” (p. 134).

Even if they function in the same way online as offline, the Internet empowers gatekeepers by providing novel ways to connect with those they affect. They can use social media, email, and hyperlinking, for instance. That being the case, it is important to

understand who the gatekeepers are and how they are reaching Internet and social networking site users. The following section looks at the individuals and structures that play a role in gatekeeping online. It first looks at the technological, or otherwise non-human, structures that affect access to online content. It specifically considers search engines and the way that hyperlinks can make some sites more popular than others. This chapter then turns to the media itself. Traditionally recognized as gatekeepers, news professionals online are able to play an even greater role in the dissemination of content, thereby further impacting readers and viewers. Finally, this section turns to opinion leaders within people's social circles. Thanks to email and social networking sites, these people can have a much greater impact on their friends and acquaintances than they might ordinarily have in offline interactions. The people and structures involved in gatekeeping online help determine how people are affected by content. An understanding of these factors is, therefore, important for a discussion of the implications of online news consumption.

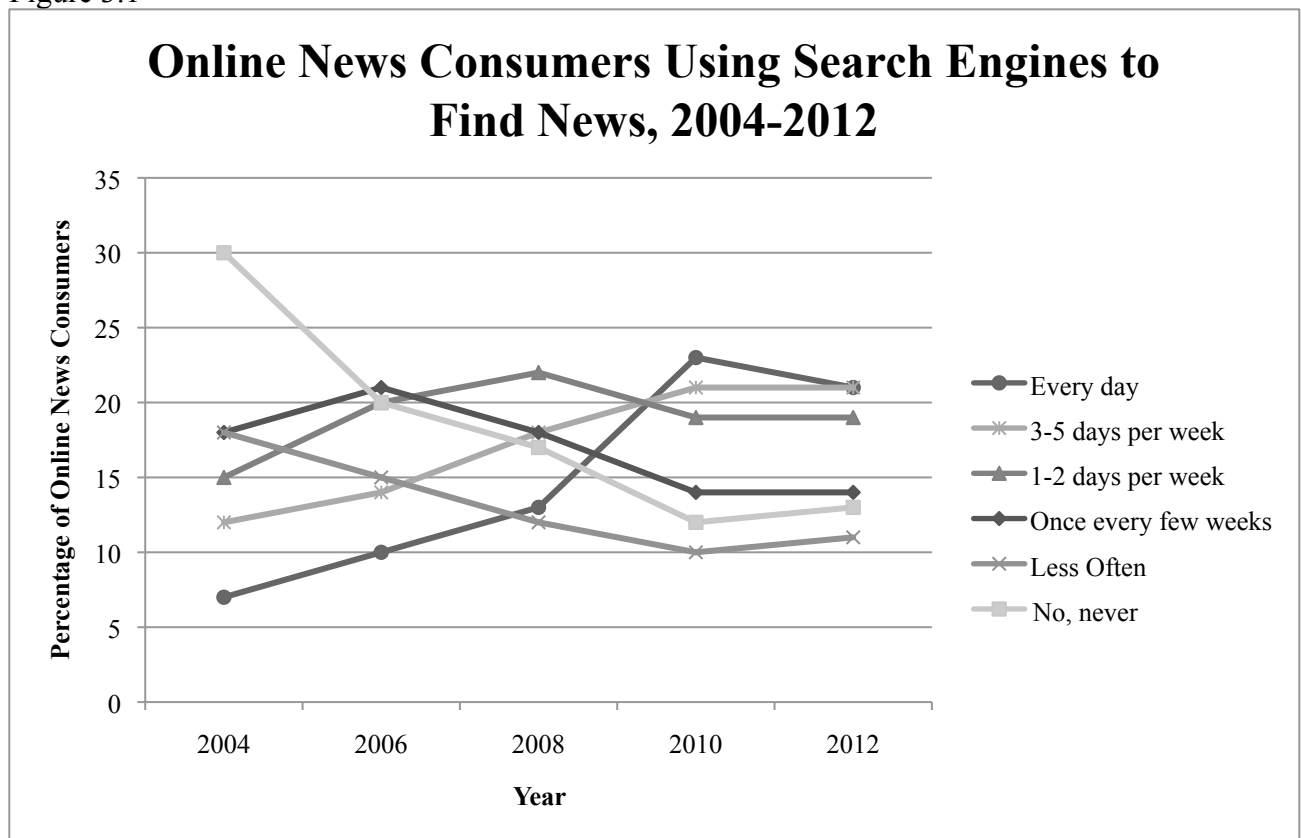
### *Search Engines*

As noted, online, gatekeepers can take many forms, and technological structures even play a role in controlling the acquisition of news. Given the vastness of the Internet, users sometimes experience difficulty categorizing and accessing content. As a result, developers came up with search engines, sites which help individuals navigate the Web and find specific information they seek. Since their debut, search engines have been popular, becoming even more so over time. From 2004 on, the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey has asked respondents, "Have you ever used search engines such as Google, Yahoo, or Bing, to search for news on a particular subject you



are interested in? [IF YES] How often do you do this, every day, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?” Figure 3.1 illustrates responses from online news consumers. The data show that since 2004, use of search engines on at least a weekly basis has steadily increased. Perhaps of greatest interest is the change in the percentage of respondents saying they use search engines to find news every day. In 2004, only seven percent of online news consumers affirmed they did so on a daily basis. In 2012, however, twenty-one percent of respondents said the same. This difference represents a threefold growth. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer respondents say that they use search engines to find news once every few weeks or less. In 2004, thirty percent of online news consumers said they never use search engines to find news. By 2012, only thirteen percent of respondents would say the same.

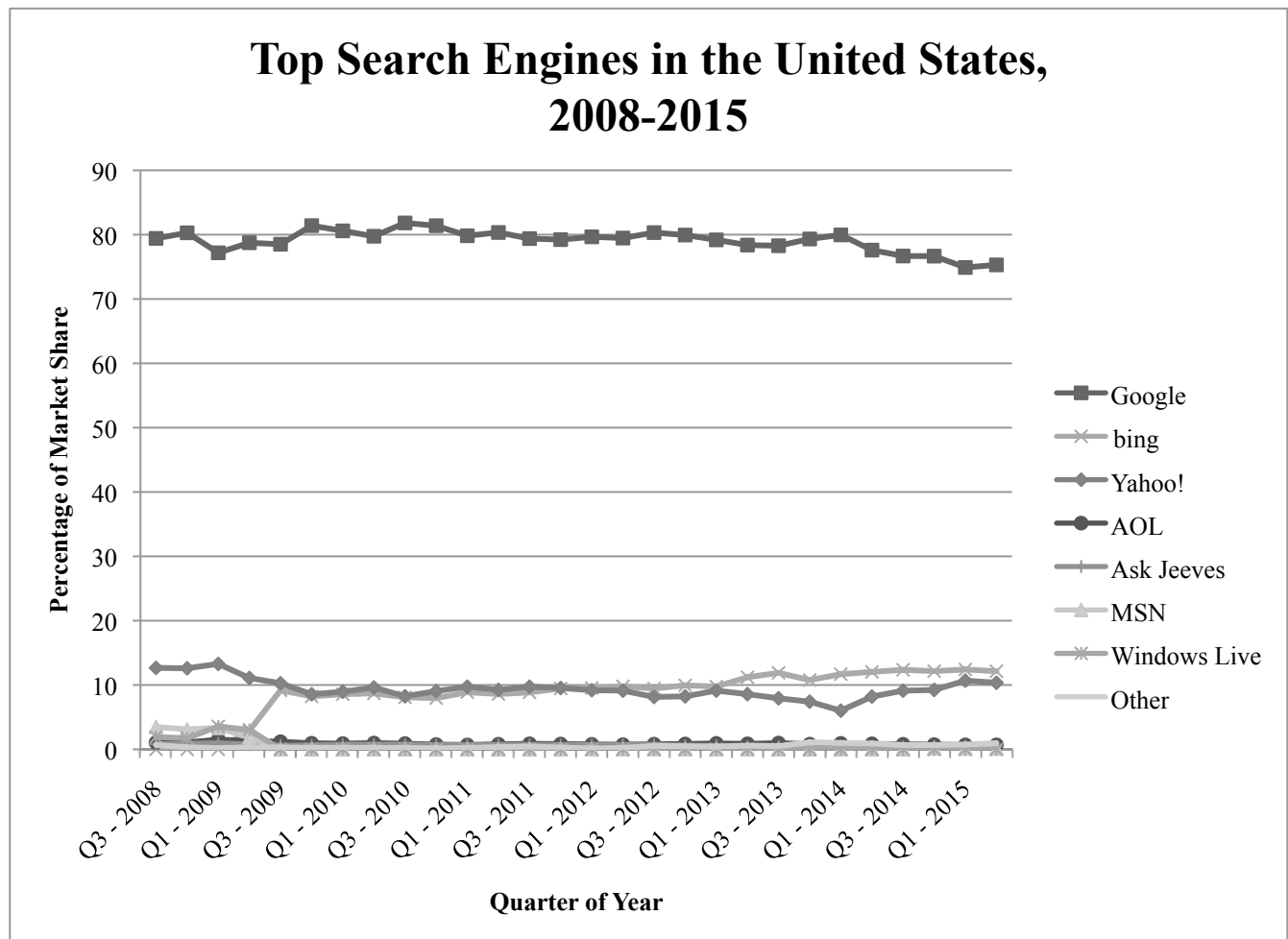
Figure 3.1



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

The proliferation of search engines is a unique feature of the Internet, and there are a number of different ones now available to users. Using data from StatCounter, an independent website analytics provider, Figure 3.2 illustrates the top search engines in the United States and their market share from 2008 to present. The graph looks at data on a quarterly basis and demonstrates that Google is, by far, the most popular search engine among American Internet users, consistently controlling approximately three-quarters of the market share.

Figure 3.2



Dataset: StatCounter Global Stats, Q3 of 2008 to Q2 of 2015,  
[http://gs.statcounter.com/#search\\_engine-US-quarterly-200803-201502](http://gs.statcounter.com/#search_engine-US-quarterly-200803-201502)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> StatCounter Global Stats is a “web-analytics service,” providing “independent, unbiased stats on Internet usage trends” (StatCounter Global Stats, 1999). StatCounter records page views, using a tracking

A few characteristics define online news consumers who regularly rely upon search engines to retrieve information for them. For one, they are vaguely young. Based on data from the 2004 to 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys, Figure 3.3 shows the percentage of people in each age range who use search engines at least three days per week.<sup>11</sup> As the graph demonstrates, a high number of people aged twenty-five to thirty-four and aged thirty-five to forty-four consistently use search engines. In 2004, about a fifth of the individuals in these two groups relied on search engines. By 2008, that number rose to roughly thirty-five percent of people in those age groups, and in 2010 and 2012, about half of them regularly used search engines to retrieve news. Likewise, people in the eighteen to twenty-four, forty-five to fifty-four, and fifty-five to sixty-four age groups evidence trends similar to each other. In 2008, a little less than a third of the individuals in these three categories regularly used search engines, and by 2010, close to forty-five percent of the people in these respondents said they used search engines at least three days per week to find news. The outlying group remains those over sixty-five years of age. A much smaller percentage of them regularly relies upon search engines to find news. Indeed, in 2004, only fifteen percent of people over sixty-five years or older said they used search engines at least three days per week, and by 2012, that number had reached only thirty-two percent. Although this change represents impressive growth,

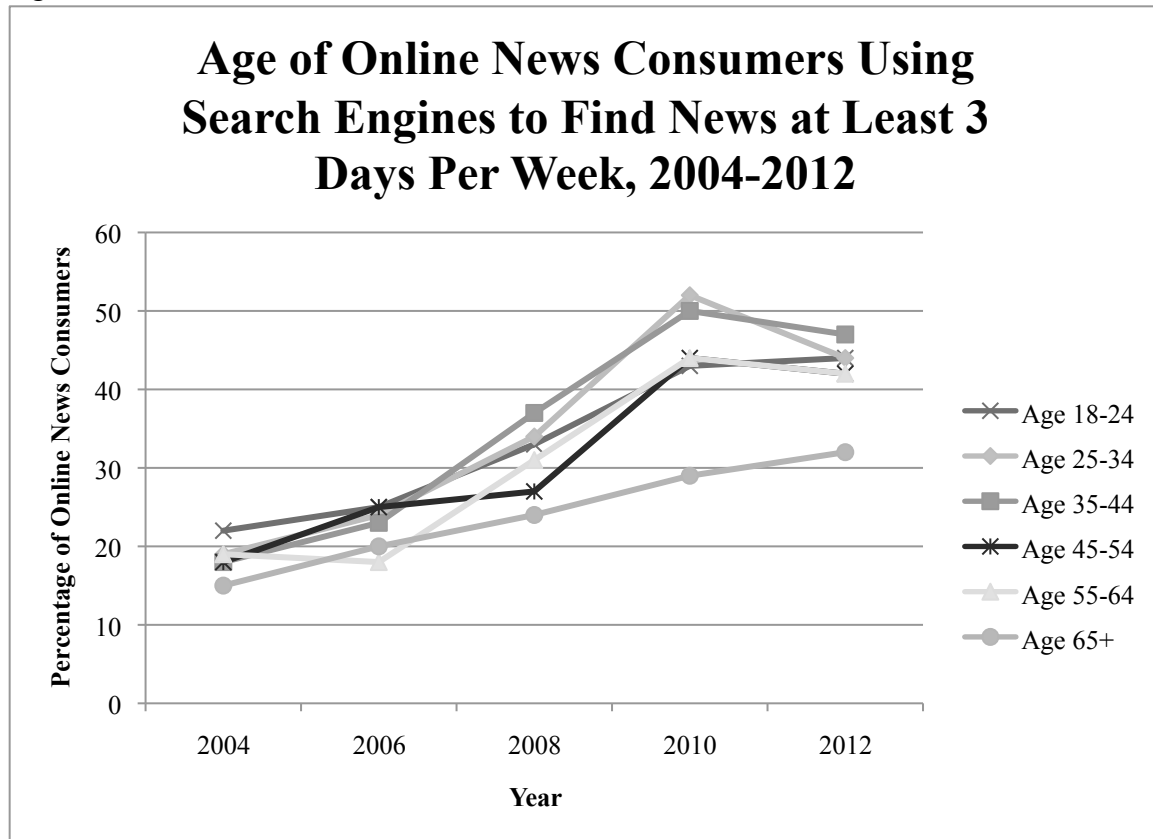
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code. For data on search engines, StatCounter examines “every page view referred by a search engine” (StatCounter Global Stats, 1999). StatCounter Global Stats affirms, “We do not collate our stats with any other information sources. No artificial weightings are used. We remove bot activity and make a small adjustment to our browser stats for prerendering in Google Chrome. Aside from those adjustments, we publish the data as we record it” (StatCounter Global Stats, 1999). StatCounter’s global sample size includes over 15 billion page views per month. In June 2013, for instance, the global sample size represented 17.5 billion page views, of which the U.S. accounted for 4.2 billion page views. StatCounter is “not aware of any other publicly available service providing market share stats that has a bigger sample size on which they base their information” (StatCounter Global Stats, 1999). Finally, data from StatCounter Global Stats constitute “a random sample of people worldwide” (StatCounter Global Stats, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> This graph looks at responses to the same question as illustrated in Figure 2.1. It focuses specifically on individuals who said they used search engines to find news every day or three to five days per week. It then differentiates these people, according to their age group.

search engine penetration among people over sixty-five years old lags in comparison with that of younger participants.

Figure 3.3



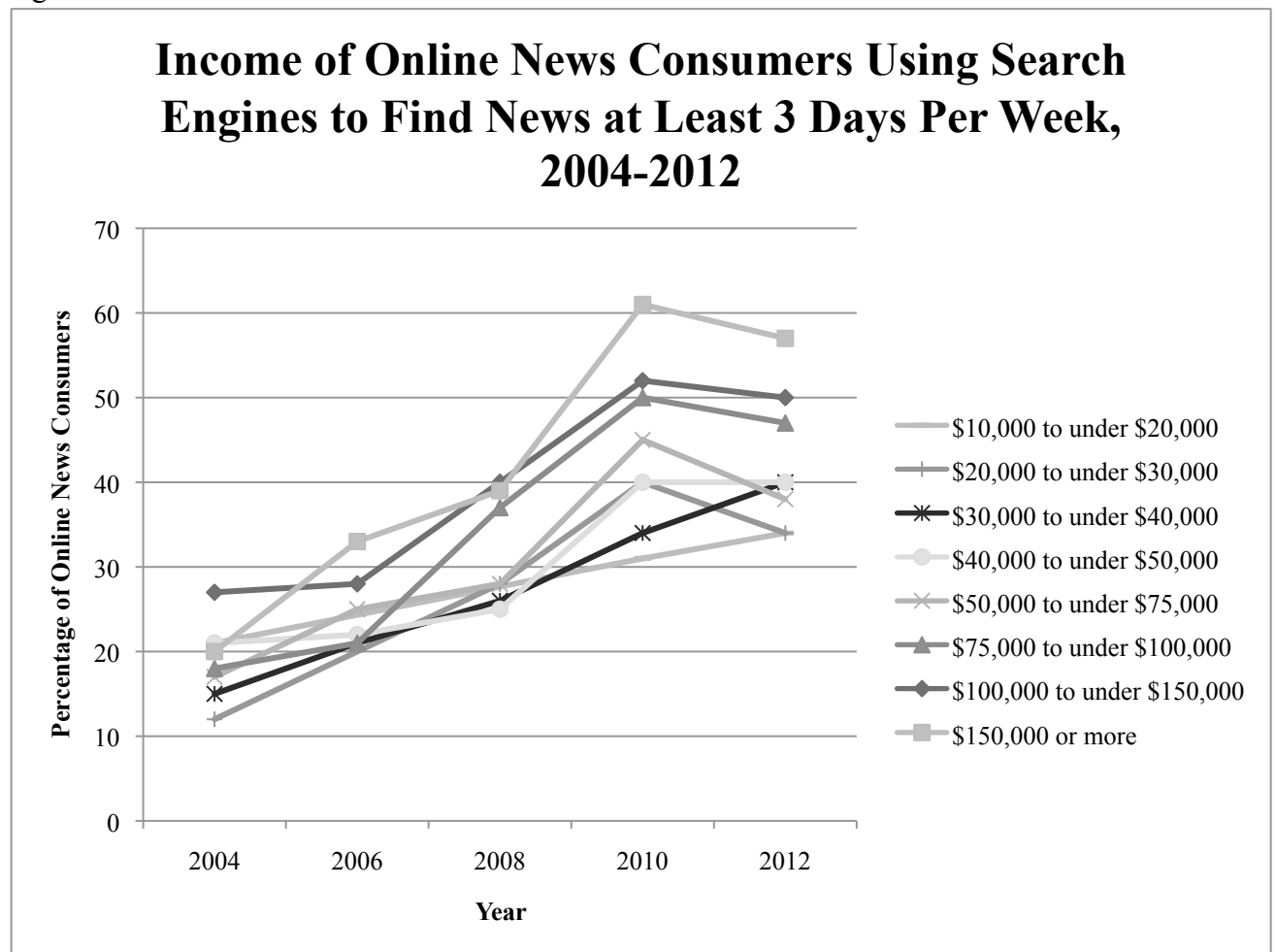
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

Another feature which differentiates people who regularly use search engines to locate news information is their income level. In general, they tend to be wealthy. Using data from the 2004 to 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys, Figure 3.4 illustrates the percentage of people in each income category who use search engines at least three days per week.<sup>12</sup> As the graph demonstrates, regular search engine use is greatest among people with annual income of \$150,000 or more. In 2010 and 2012, approximately six in ten people making that much money said they used search engines at least three days per

<sup>12</sup> This graph looks at responses to the same question as illustrated in Figure 2.1. It focuses specifically on individuals who said they used search engines to find news every day or three to five days per week. It then differentiates these people, according to their income category.

week to find news. Directly beneath them are people making between \$100,000 and \$150,000 per year. In 2010 and 2012, about half of them said they regularly relied on search engines to locate news. This category is then followed by people making between \$75,000 and \$100,000. Likewise, almost half of these individuals said they used search engines at least three days per week for news purposes. These categories are then followed by people making \$50,000 to \$75,000, \$40,000 to \$50,000 and \$30,000 to \$40,000. In 2010 and 2012, about forty percent of people in these three income groups affirmed regularly relying on search engines to find news. Finally, in 2012, only thirty-four percent of people making \$20,000 to under \$30,000 and \$10,000 to under \$20,000 said they regularly used search engines for news purposes. Income, therefore, has an important influence on whether or not respondents rely on search engines for locating news content. Figure 3.4 nicely shows this fact.

Figure 3.4



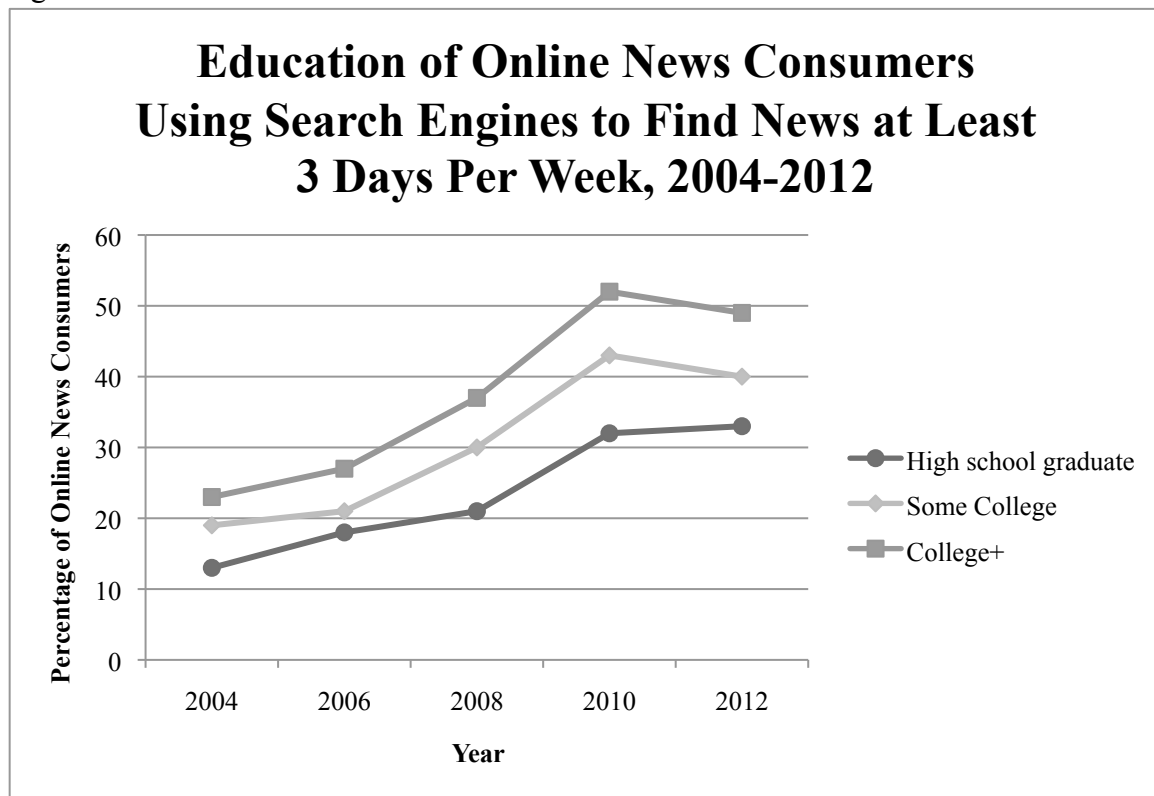
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

The final characteristic defining those who regularly use search engines for news purposes is their education level. Relying on data from the Pew Research Center's 2004 to 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys, Figure 3.5 clearly evidences the impact that educational achievement has on search engine use.<sup>13</sup> People with only a high school degree demonstrate the least amount of search engine penetration. In 2004, roughly one in ten of these individuals said they regularly used search engines to find news. By 2012, that number had risen to roughly three in ten. Individuals with some college education

<sup>13</sup> This graph looks at responses to the same question as illustrated in Figure 2.1. It focuses specifically on individuals who said they used search engines to find news every day or three to five days per week. It then differentiates these people, according to their educational attainment.

evidence slightly greater search engine penetration. In 2004, slightly less than a fifth of people in this category said they relied on search engines at least three days per week to locate news content. By 2012, roughly double that number said the same. Finally, individuals holding college degrees or more are the most likely to use search engines regularly for news purposes. In 2004, almost a quarter of them said they relied on search engines to access news at least three days per week, and in 2012, about half of such individuals said the same. Educational achievement is, therefore, an important predictor of whether or not people will use search engines to find news content.

Figure 3.5



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2004-2012

The three preceding graphs illustrate the defining characteristics of the people relying upon search engines for news consumption. Relatively young, wealthy, and well-educated individuals are the most likely to use these sites to find the information they

seek. Therefore, relatively young, wealthy, and well-educated people are the ones with the highest probability of being affected by search engines' gatekeeping function. These sites operate by retrieving content based on users' specified search terms and criteria. "The first generation of search engines, such as AltaVista, focused on keyword density and other characteristics found within individual Web pages" (Hindman, 2009, p. 43). This format, though useful, also had a tendency to turn up useless information, unrelated to the content individuals actually sought. Then, in 1997, Larry Page and Sergey Brin developed Google. Google operates according to "a recursive algorithm in which sites that receive lots of links, from *other* sites that receive lots of links, are rated most highly. In essence, sites are ranked in a popularity contest in which each link is a vote, but the votes of popular sites carry more weight" (Hindman, 2009, p. 43). This format ensures that users see the most relevant results.

However, it privileges already powerful, already popular sites, as they are the ones most likely to be returned by a search engine. "Profound inequalities in links define search engine visibility and patterns of traffic" (Hindman, 2009, p. 56). By categorizing and sorting content, search engines control what an increasing number of users see and, therefore, influence the dissemination of ideas. Indeed, according to Hindman's (2009) Hitwise data, "19.5 percent of all news site visits came directly from search engines; [and] an additional 16.5 percent of traffic came directly from portal front pages (such as Yahoo.com)" (p. 70). This accounts for a substantial portion of all news site visits. The structure of search engines proves that the information space is not a pure democracy, and content is not created equally. Some are more likely to be viewed, simply due to technological factors, but the structure of the Internet does not alone determine access.



The people using the Web also play a role in driving acquisition of information. The following sections examine the humans who serve a gatekeeping function with regard to online news consumption.

### *The Media Itself*

Traditional media sources continue to serve a gatekeeping function on the Internet, as newspapers and broadcast services have web-based platforms. On these sites appear stories and content that is also displayed in print or on television. Therefore, normal rules apply. Journalists, guided by their own beliefs and ideas, must first decide to report on a topic (Flegel & Chafee, 1971). Newsroom editors then determine what content to publish and promote (White, 1950; Snider, 1967). At these two checkpoints, the personal prejudices of news professionals play an important role, though Shoemaker and Reese (1996) contend that objective newsworthiness, journalistic values, and the organizational structure of traditional media have a balancing impact on any biases or idiosyncrasies news professionals may bring to the job. Also of significance are “broader institutional, economic, and structural factors” that impact production and publication (Hindman, 2009, p. 12).

Traditional news services, such as newspapers and broadcast services, have an obvious gatekeeping function because they determine what topics and information to cover and disseminate. However, “soft news” sources can be just as important when it comes to gatekeeping. According to Baum (2002), soft news stories are defined by “a set of... characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and emphasis on dramatic subject matter, such as crime and disaster” (p. 92). Examples of soft news sources include talk shows, such as

*The Tonight Show*, and entertainment shows, such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*. These programs are accessible both on television and online via their websites or YouTube channels. Soft news is primarily relied upon for its entertainment value, but it can offer users, particularly those who do not tune into traditional hard news sources, access to relevant current events. “By repackaging news about select political issues, including foreign crises, as entertainment, soft news dramatically reduces the cognitive costs of paying attention” (Baum, 2002, p. 92). People, therefore, learn about news events without actually having intended to invest time and attention resources into doing so. “By making news about foreign crises, or other high-profile political issues, accessible, soft news programs increase the likelihood that politically uninterested individuals will pay attention to, and learn about, them” (Baum, 2002, p. 94). Soft news sources, therefore, play the same gatekeeping role that traditional platforms do. They are responsible for determining what information is profiled and then circulated within the broader public.

John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* provides an excellent example of the effectiveness of soft news sources in raising awareness about complex current events. On June 1, 2014, Oliver did a wildly popular segment, discussing net neutrality. Using a rather liberal dose of humor, he described the open Internet concept and explained that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was currently accepting public comment on proposed rules that would allow for the prioritization of Internet content. He then issued a call to action:

And at this point, and I can’t believe I’m about to do this, I would like to address the Internet commenters out there directly. Good evening, monsters. This may be the moment you’ve spent your whole lives training for... But this is the moment you were made for, commenters... For once in your life, we need you to channel that anger, that badly

spelled bile that you normally reserve for unforgivable attacks on actresses you seem to think have put on weight, or politicians that you disagree with, or photos of your ex-girlfriend getting on with her life, or non-white actors being cast as fictional characters... We need you to get out there and, for once in your lives, focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction. Seize your moment, my lovely trolls, turn on caps lock, and fly my pretties! Fly! Fly! (Oliver, 2014)

Interestingly enough, viewers listened. Within a day, the FCC's public commenting system had stopped working due to the sudden high volume of traffic Oliver had sent its way. According to the *Washington Post*, *Last Week Tonight's* segment resulted in over 45,000 new comments on net neutrality (McDonald, 2014). Evidently, John Oliver's soft news segment led to greater visibility of an otherwise unknown public policy issue. Here, Oliver functioned as a gatekeeper, affecting the public awareness of news stories.

The term "news professional" is, therefore, not limited to the traditional role occupied by newspaper and broadcast editors and journalists. The phrase includes soft news sources, as well. These people all determine what topics and information to cover and report, thereby serving as gatekeepers. The Internet magnifies this function, though, by enabling these individuals to also affect the dissemination of content. News professional can now use their email and social media pages to drive traffic to articles, stories, and other information. They can increase the likelihood that a person will access certain content by sharing it on these different online media. The following section, therefore, examines the number of people who rely on journalists in this way. Moreover, it attempts to understand what the important traits of these individuals are. It first turns to social networking sites, before looking specifically at Twitter. It then examines Internet users receiving news via email from news organizations and reporters.

Facebook and other social networking sites allow news services to share stories that have recently been published to their sites, and enable reporters to promote their own work. In 2010 and 2012, the Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents if they use social networking sites to get news directly from journalists and news organizations.<sup>14</sup> In 2010, sixteen percent of the 1,264 social networking site users surveyed affirmed that they follow journalists and news organizations. In 2012, almost a fifth of people with social networking profiles said the same. Tables 3.1 and 3.2<sup>15</sup> display the responses to these surveys. Comparisons between the two indicate that the importance of journalists and news organizations on social networking sites is increasing. Between 2010 and 2012, the percentage of social networking site users following reporters and newspapers increased three percent, a substantial amount of growth, given the relatively modest numbers evidenced in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 overall. Responses to the first wave of the 2014 American Trends Panel, represented in Table 3.3 also bear out this trend. Participants in that survey were asked if they follow “news organizations, reporters, or commentators” on Facebook. Of the 2,153 respondents with a Facebook page, twenty-eight percent said that they follow such individuals or groups on the site. Moreover, of the individuals who pay attention to Facebook posts, thirty-seven percent said that they like or follow news organizations, reporters, or commentators. These surveys illustrate the increasingly important gatekeeping role that journalists and news organizations have

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<sup>14</sup> In 2010, “the question read, ‘Do you use social networking sites to follow any news organizations or journalists as a fan or friend, or not?’” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 77). In 2012, participants were asked, “Do you get news or news headlines on social networking sites directly from news organizations or journalists, or not?” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 77).

<sup>15</sup> In both of these tables, as in subsequent tables that will appear throughout this chapter, some cells do not contain data because it is inapplicable. For instance, there is no data in the “Not an Internet user” row for individuals who identify as Internet users. These columns still sum to approximately 100%.

on social networking sites. By sharing content on such forums, they can increase its visibility and exposure.

Table 3.1

Following Journalists and News Organizations on Social Networking Sites, 2010

	Have a social networking profile	Internet Users	Total
Yes	16%	9%	7%
No	47%	26%	21%
Do not get news from social networking sites	37%	20%	17%
Do not have a social networking profile	---	45%	37%
Not an Internet user	---	---	18%
	[1,264 respondents]	[2,474 respondents]	[3,006 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010

Table 3.2

Following Journalists and News Organizations on Social Networking Sites, 2012

	Have a social networking profile	Internet Users	Total
Yes	19%	12%	10%
No	66%	42%	36%
Do not get news from social networking sites	14%	9%	7%
Do not have a social networking profile	---	37%	31%
Not an Internet user	---	---	14%
	[1,512 respondents]	[2,565 respondents]	[3,003 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2012

Table 3.3  
Following News Organizations, Reporters, or Commentators on Facebook, 2014

	Facebook users	Pay attention to Facebook posts
Yes	28%	37%
No	49%	63%
Sees no politics posts or does not pay attention	23%	---
	[2,153 respondents]	[1,627 respondents]

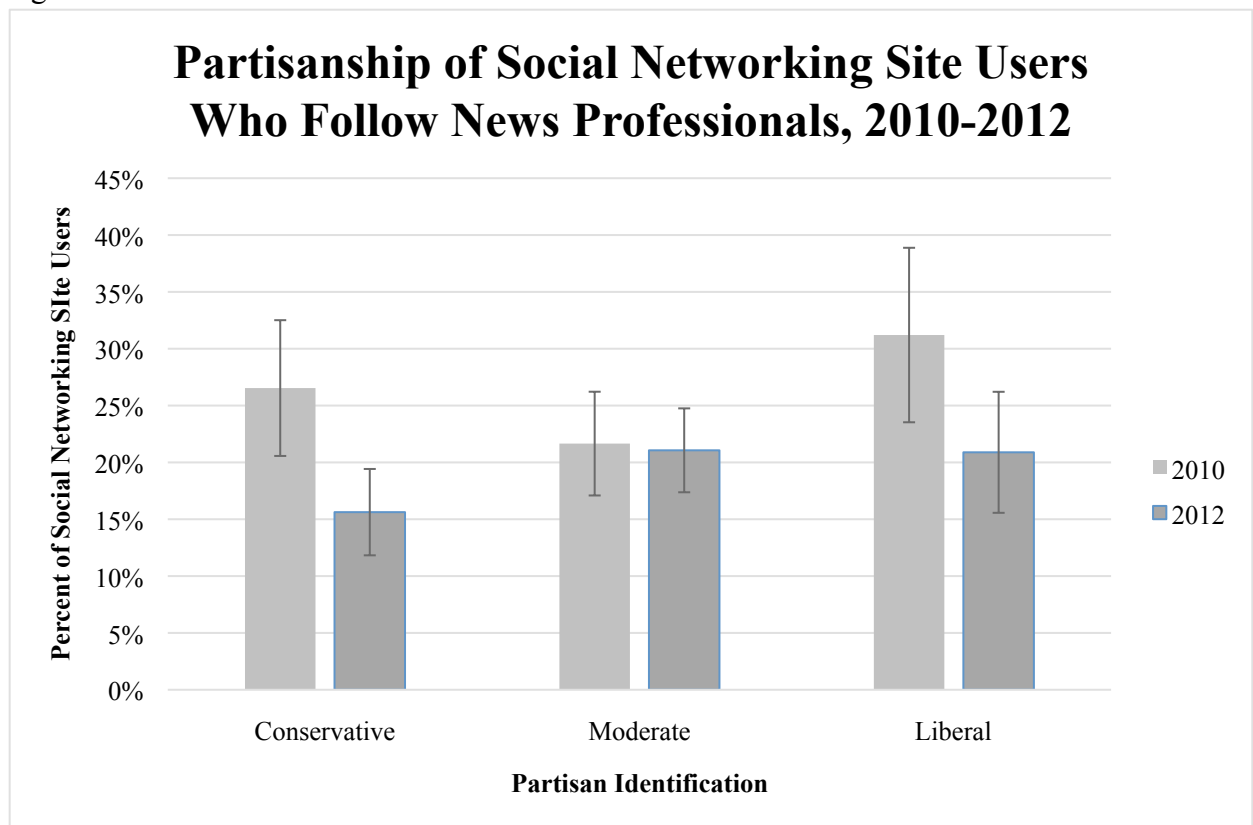
Dataset: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel Wave 1

Unfortunately, there is a relative dearth of data points available from the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys for analyzing many of the defining traits of social networking site users who follow journalists' pages. Specifically, there is an insufficient amount of information regarding these particular individuals' age, income, race, and geographic location. That said, there are enough data to comment on their partisan identification and education level.

Figure 3.6 displays the partisanship of social networking site users who follow the pages of news professionals. In 2010, the data show that conservatives and liberals were slightly more likely than moderates to follow reporters on sites like Facebook. However, the responses to the 2012 survey exhibit little difference between partisans and non-partisans, as all of the confidence intervals included evidence overlap among the three groups. In fact, the most interesting finding is the change in conservatives following news organizations on social media. From 2010 to 2012, there is a meaningful decrease in the average number of conservatives following news professionals on social networking sites. There is also a decrease in the number of liberals doing so, but the overlap in the 2010 and 2012 confidence intervals for liberals suggests that this difference could be

negligible. Still, these changes are remarkable, given that 2012 was a presidential election year. It would seem logical that more partisans would begin following news professionals on social media during that time, so the results seem counterintuitive. Although the datasets do not provide a reason for this discrepancy, some may be suggested. Perhaps, distaste for the process-focused campaign coverage made partisans disengage from journalists in 2012. Other answers are certainly conceivable, though.

Figure 3.6

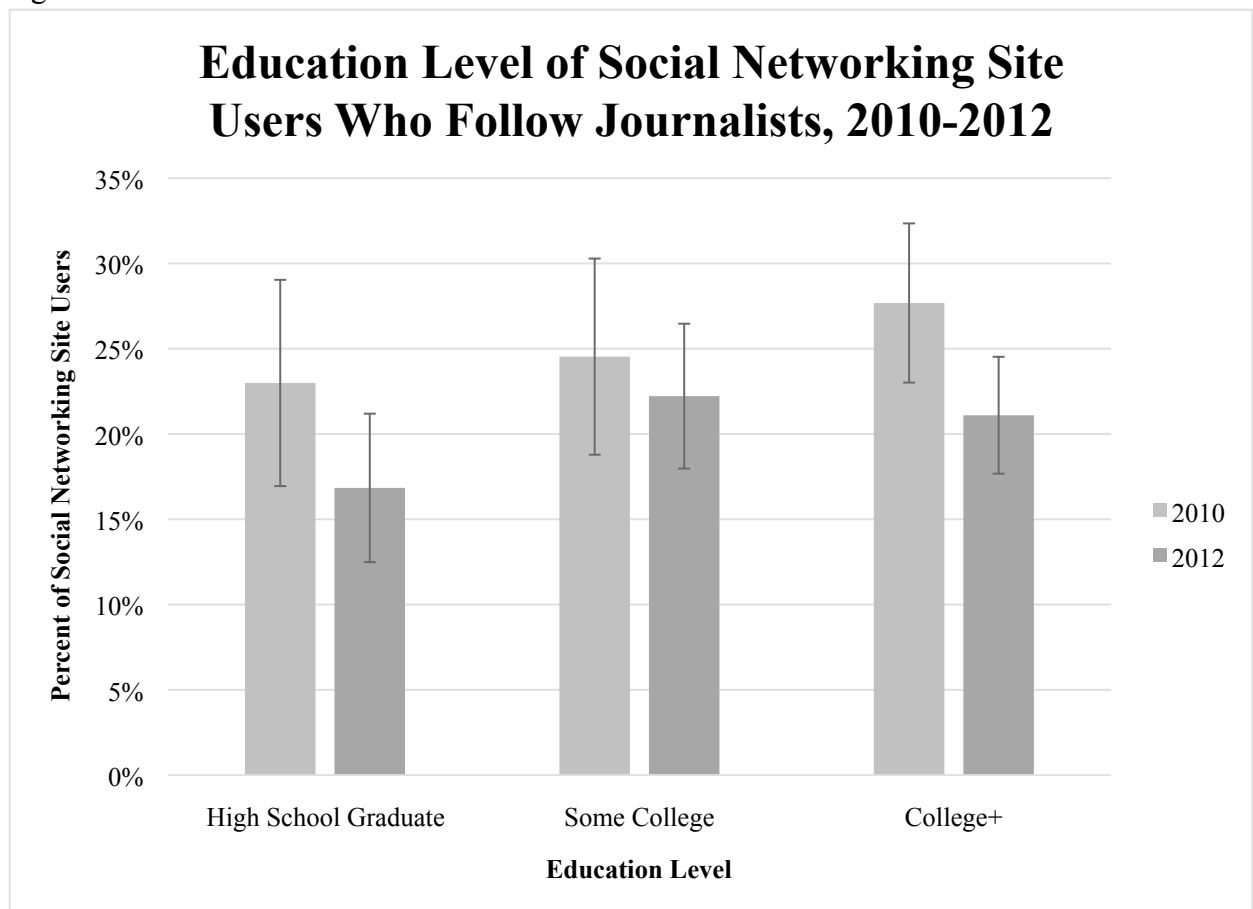


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Figure 3.7, meanwhile, examines the education levels of social networking site users who follow news professionals. The data here shows that better educated individuals are slightly more likely to follow journalists on social networking sites. In 2010, twenty-three percent of individuals with a high school diploma said they did so, while a quarter of people with some college training and twenty-eight percent with a

Bachelor's degree or more said the same. In 2012, the average went slightly down in all categories. Seventeen percent of high school graduates said they followed reporters on sites like Facebook, while twenty-two percent of those with some college background and twenty-one percent of people with an undergraduate degree or more affirmed likewise. Still, the confidence intervals included show that the differences evidenced from 2010 to 2012 could be negligible.

Figure 3.7



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Figures 3.7 and 3.8 attempt to illustrate the important characteristics of people who follow journalists on social networking sites. Unfortunately, there is relatively little data on these people, given that they represent a minority of the total population of social networking site users. That being the case, it is probably best to rely on the defining traits



of social media users in order to understand those who use these sites to keep up with news professionals. As shown in Chapter 2, youth seems to characterize the people who have social networking profiles.

Meanwhile, Twitter plays a function similar to social networking sites by allowing reporters and news organizations to tweet out headlines and links to articles. In 2010 and 2012, the Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents if they follow any news services or journalists on Twitter.<sup>16</sup> The two datasets, depicted in Tables 3.5 and 3.5 below show an increasing number of Twitter users following news professionals on the site. In 2010, almost a quarter of Twitter users said they follow journalists and news organizations, while in 2012, thirty-six percent said the same. Interestingly, the number of people who do not follow journalists on Twitter also increased over the two years covered, going from thirty-four percent in 2010 to forty-seven percent in 2012. This change seems to reflect the growing number of respondents who see news on Twitter at all. In 2010, four in ten users said they do not receive news from Twitter. In 2012, however, less than a fifth of respondents said they do not see news on the site. Therefore, a growing number of Twitter users see news on the site, even if they are not using it to follow journalists. This incredible and rapid growth likely reflects the increasing penetration of Twitter. Launched in 2009, the site was still in its infancy when Pew first asked about it in 2010. By 2012, it had developed more as a site, and news professionals increasingly saw its value as a vehicle for the promotion of content.

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<sup>16</sup> In 2010, “the question read: ‘Do you use Twitter to follow any news organizations or journalists, or not?’” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 75). In 2012, respondents were asked, “Do you follow any news organizations or journalists on Twitter, or not?” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 75).

Table 3.4  
Following Journalists and News Organizations on Twitter, 2010

	Twitter Users	Internet Users	Total
Yes	24%	3%	2%
No	34%	4%	3%
Do not get news from Twitter	42%	5%	4%
Do not use Twitter	---	89%	73%
Not an Internet user	---	---	18%
	[256 respondents]	[2,474 respondents]	[3,006 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010

Table 3.5  
Following Journalists and News Organizations on Twitter, 2012

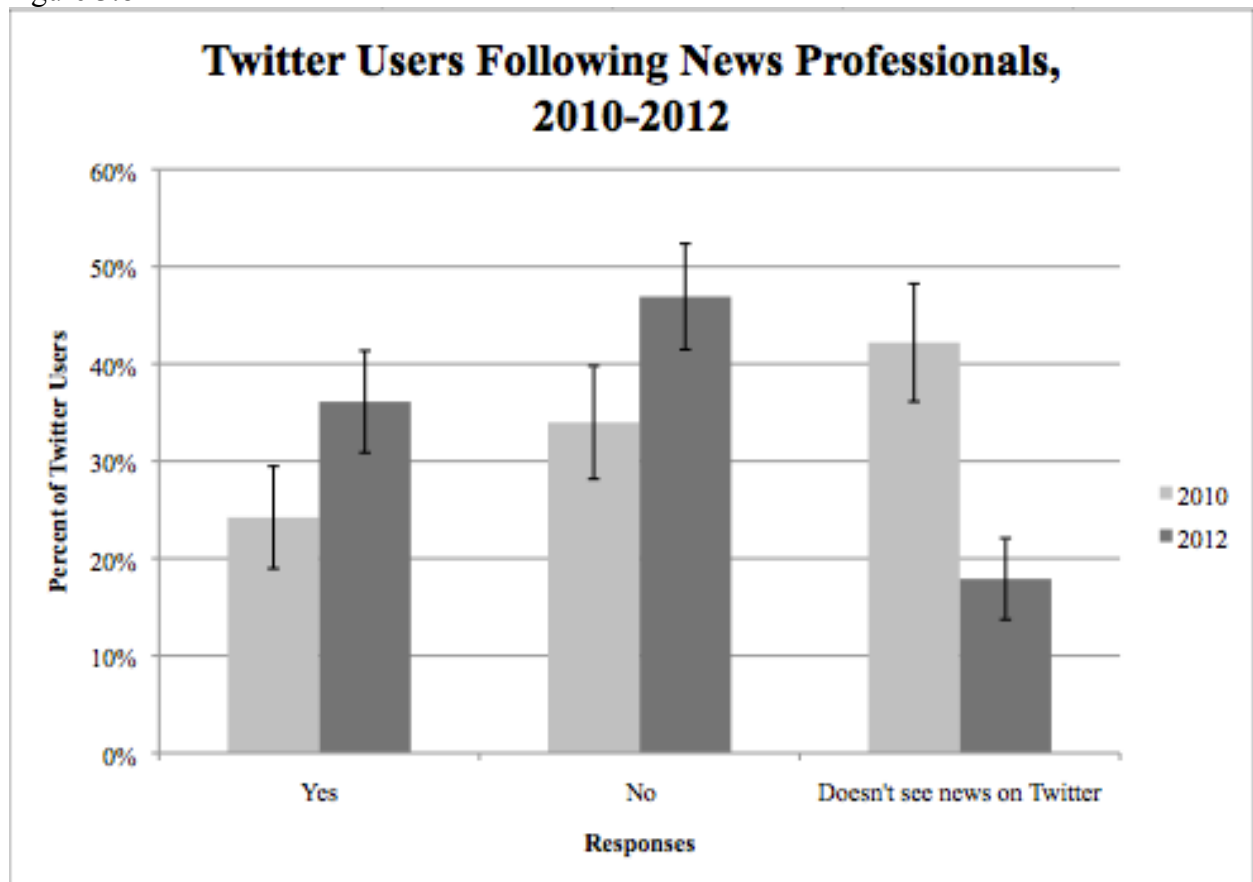
	Twitter Users	Internet Users	Total
Yes	36%	5%	5%
No	47%	7%	6%
Never see news on Twitter	18%	3%	2%
Do not use Twitter	---	85%	73%
Not an Internet user	---	---	14%
	[324 respondents]	[2,565 respondents]	[3,003 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2012

It is important to note that the statistics discussed above are based on a limited number of data points, as few respondents actually use Twitter. Figure 3.8 shows, however, that the increase in Twitter users following news professionals is meaningful, as the 2010 and 2012 “Yes” confidence intervals do not overlap. Furthermore, the decrease in users never seeing news on the site is also meaningful. In fact, there is a remarkable

distance between the lower end of the 2010 “Doesn’t see news on Twitter” confidence interval and the upper end of the 2012 one. These results indicate that Twitter, and social media generally, provide news professionals with an increasingly useful channel through which to serve as a gatekeeper.

Figure 3.8



Dataset: Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

In addition to social networking sites, news professionals can also disseminate content through email. Many media platforms offer subscription services for users, who wish to receive a daily or weekly digest of important news and headlines. In 2010 and 2012, the Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents, “Do you get news or news headlines by email directly from any news organizations or journalists, or not?” In 2010, twelve percent of Internet users said they receive news via email directly from

news professionals, and in 2012, fourteen percent of Internet users said the same. Tables 3.6 and 3.7 show participant responses. Although only a minority of respondents relies on email for news acquisition, the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys demonstrate that a consistent number of individuals do use email to remain informed. Email, therefore, serves as another channel for media professionals to influence the dissemination of content and ideas.

Table 3.6  
Receive News via Email from News Professionals, 2010

	Internet Users	Total
Yes	12%	10%
No	43%	36%
Do not get any news by email	44%	36%
Not an Internet user	---	18%
	[2,474 respondents]	[3,006 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010

Table 3.7  
Receive News via Email from News Professionals, 2012

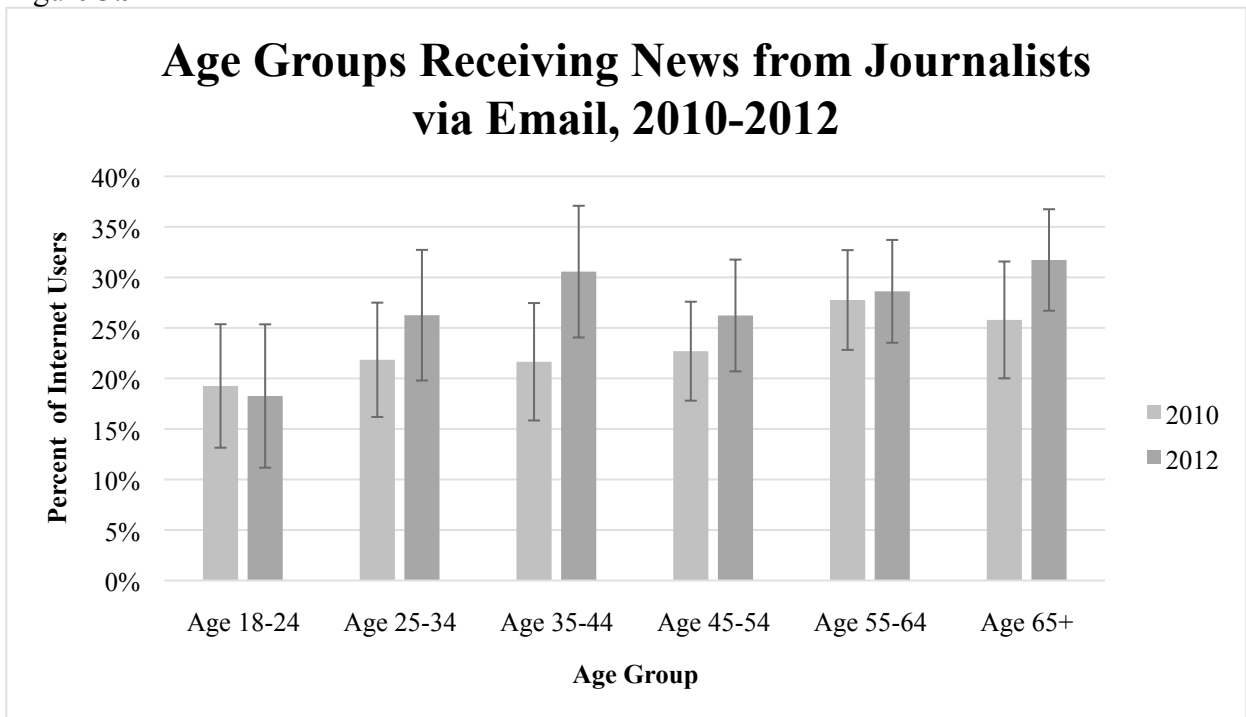
	Internet Users	Total
Yes	14%	12%
No	39%	33%
Do not get any news by email	47%	40%
Not an Internet user	---	14%
	[2,565 respondents]	[3,003 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2012

For the most part, the Internet users who receive news via email from news professionals are older, wealthier, better educated, and more partisan. Figure 3.9 shows

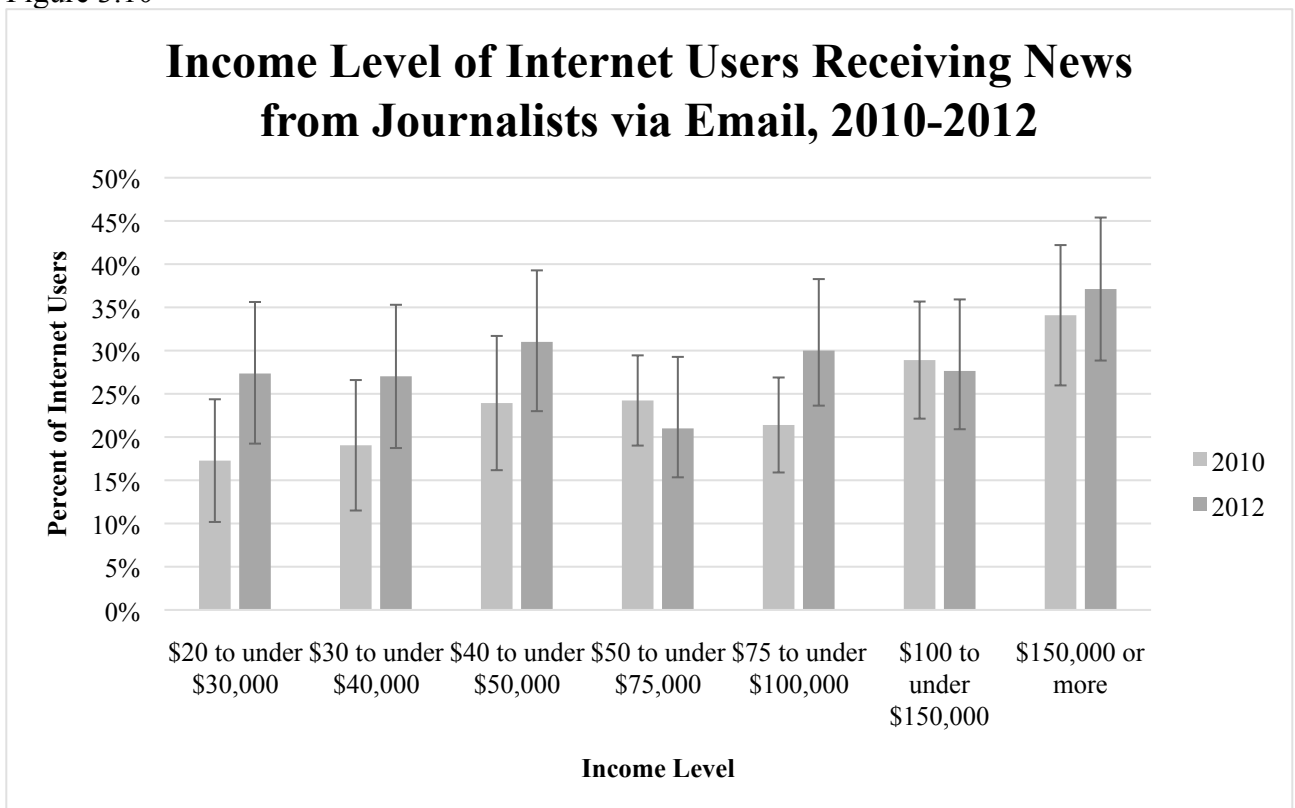
the age ranges of such individuals. The data indicate that respondents aged eighteen to twenty-four are the least likely to subscribe for news via email from journalists. Meanwhile, Figure 3.10 breaks down responses, according to individuals' income levels. Although the responses are somewhat varied with respect to the lower income brackets, those making \$150,000 or more are the most likely to receive news via email from news organizations. Education and partisan identification are the best predictors of whether or not respondents receive such emails, though. Figure 3.11 analyzes the data with respect to respondents' educational attainment. The graph demonstrates that those with some college training are more likely than those with only a high school diploma to receive emails directly from journalists, and also that participants' with a college degree have a higher probability than those without one to get such emails. The confidence intervals shown indicate that the differences between these groups are meaningful. Finally, the most interesting information comes with regard to respondents' partisan identification. Figure 3.12 looks at such data. It shows that while moderates and weak partisans are about equally likely to receive news via email from journalists, strong partisans have a much higher probability of getting such news emails. The confidence intervals displayed show that these results are not negligible. Indeed, there are meaningful differences between strong partisans and the other two categories. Altogether, these four graphs help show that via email, traditional media gatekeepers are most likely to affect older, wealthier, better educated, and more partisan individuals.

Figure 3.9



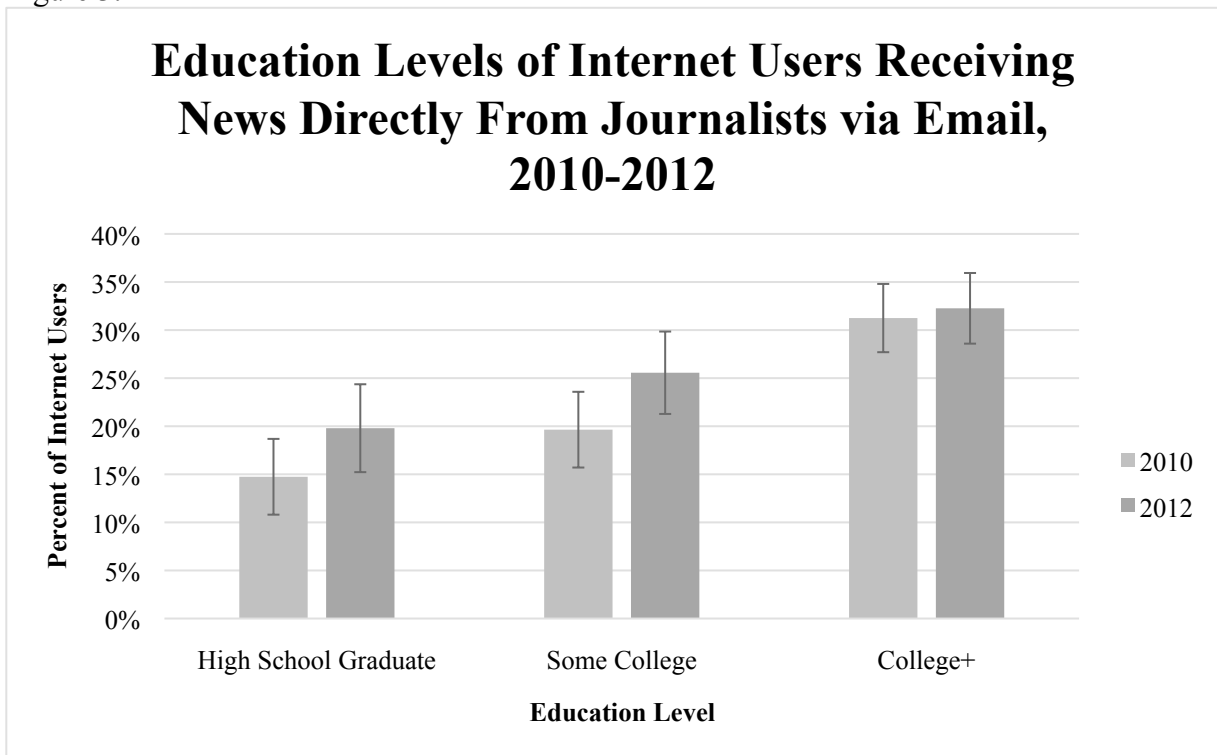
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Figure 3.10



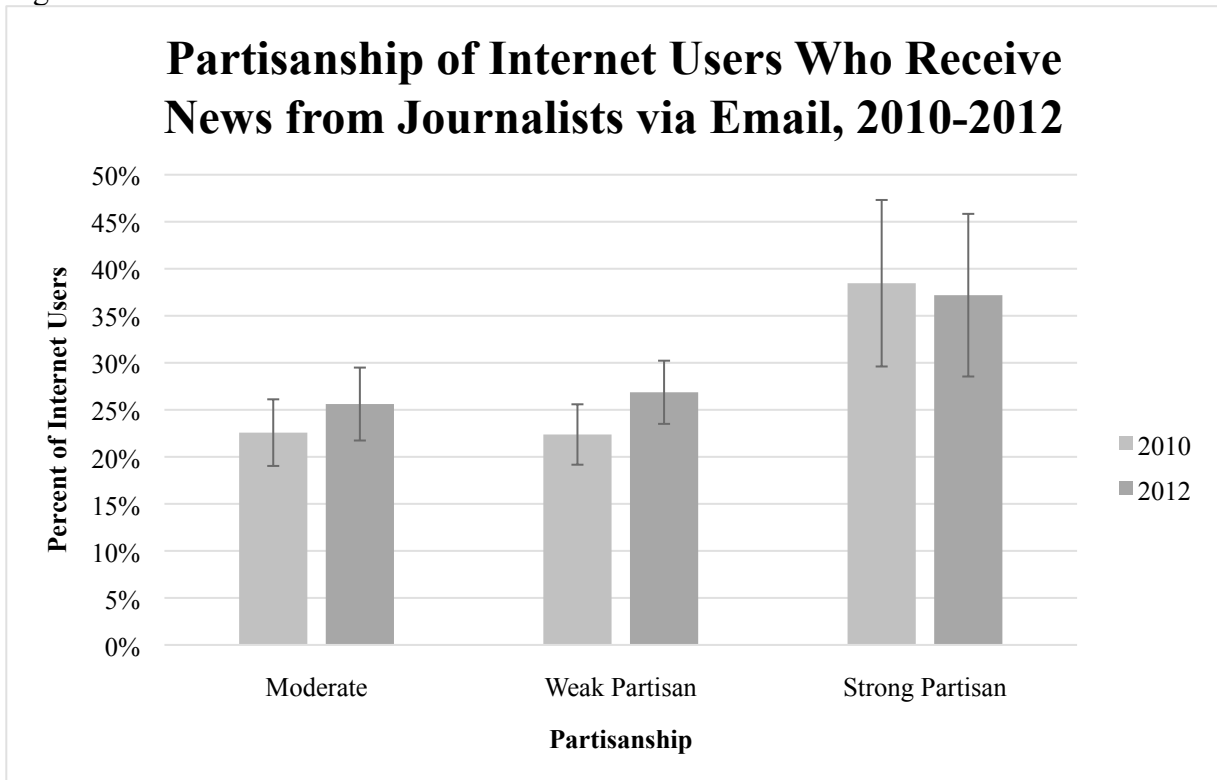
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Figure 3.11



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Figure 3.12



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

As illustrated in the preceding section, the Internet empowers news organizations to reach readers and viewers in novel ways via email subscriptions and social networking sites. For all intents and purposes, the Web extends the gatekeeping role of news professionals. Using it, they can reach a varied audience through the different media it offers. Younger, less partisan individuals may follow journalists on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Meanwhile, older, wealthier, better educated, and more partisan Internet users are generally the ones who subscribe to emails from news professionals. The Internet, therefore, allows elites, in the form of news organizations, to continue to control content acquisition. Still, the Web has also empowered people who operate in a less professional manner. The following section looks specifically at opinion leaders within individuals' social networks.

#### *Friends and Social Networks*

Much like search engines, social networking sites represent a unique feature of the Internet and the information age, and as Tables 2.9 and 2.10 show, they have become increasingly popular among Internet users. Importantly, such websites enable significant gatekeeping by average individuals. News consumption has increasingly become “a socially-engaging and socially-driven activity” (Purcell et al. 2010, p. 4), and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow users to share interesting news stories, clips, and articles with “friends” and/or followers. In doing so, these websites empower people to become opinion leaders within their circle. “All one need do in order to alter the likelihood of exposure to a given story among one’s network members is share a link on Facebook or click on a ‘Like’ button provided on the screen of many websites” (Mutz & Young, 2011, p. 1038). In doing so, individuals can powerfully drive access to content.



In fact, Messing et al. (2011) predict that “social information, and especially personal recommendations, will emerge as the most important explanatory factor shaping both the media environment to which an individual is exposed and the content that the individual chooses to view” (p. 29). Such research indicates that the people with whom one generally engages play an important role in news acquisition.

However, although the Internet has increased individuals’ opportunities to become opinion leaders within their groups of friends and acquaintances, relatively few people regularly take advantage of the soapbox that email, Facebook, Twitter, and the like offer. Since 2008, the Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey has asked respondents how often they share news on their social networking pages.<sup>17</sup> In both 2008 and 2010, only about five percent of social networking site users affirmed they did so. By 2012, a tenth said they shared news on their pages. Table 3.8 shows social networking site users’ responses. Interestingly, over the four years covered, the percentage of people who said they never posted news on their page decreased fairly dramatically – from fifty-seven to thirty-nine percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of users who said they sometimes or hardly ever shared such news increased by almost fifteen percentage points combined. This trend has seemed to hold. Participants in the first wave of the 2014 American Trends Panel were asked about their activity on Facebook. Table 3.9 shows their responses. Roughly a third of Facebook users, constituting a fairly strong minority, said they post news on their page. Additionally, forty-three percent said they

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<sup>17</sup> In 2008, “the question was worded: ‘How often do you share information about local, national, or international news on your social networking page?’ Also, the question was asked only of those who said yes to this question: ‘Do you have a profile on MySpace, Facebook, or another social networking site, or not?’” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76). In 2010, “the question asked how often you ‘post news or news headlines on social networking sites’” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76). In 2012, respondents were asked, “How often, if ever, do you share news or news headlines on social networking sites?” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76).

like such posts, while another twenty-eight percent said they comment on these items. It is important to note that the American Trends Panel does not differentiate among the frequencies with which respondents engage in these activities. Therefore, it is hard to know whether Facebook users are posting news more regularly on their pages now or not. Still, these surveys demonstrate that social networking sites have enabled at least a minority of users to serve as opinion leaders and gatekeepers within their circle.

Table 3.8  
Social Networking Site Users Sharing News on Their Page, 2008-2012

	2008	2010	2012
Regularly	6%	4%	10%
Sometimes	18%	17%	24%
Hardly ever	19%	20%	27%
Never	57%	59%	39%
	[574 respondents]	[1,264 respondents]	[1,512 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

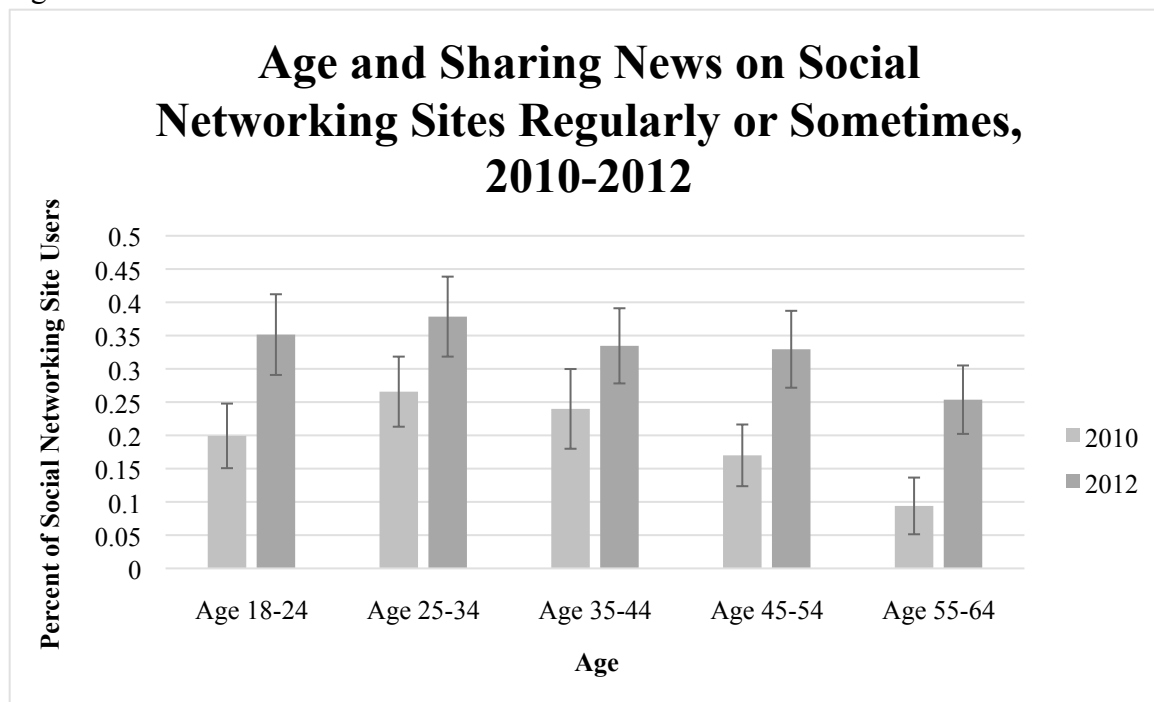
Table 3.9  
Facebook Users' Social Media Activity, 2014

	Facebook users	Pay attention to Facebook posts
Post or "share" news or opinions about government and politics	32%	41%
"Like" posts about government and politics	43%	56%
Comment on posts about government and politics	28%	37%
	[2,153 respondents]	[1,627 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel Wave 1

As noted, relatively few people choose to share news on their social networking profile. Generally, though, they tend to be younger. Figure 3.13 depicts the age groups of respondents to the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys who say they regularly or sometimes share news content on their social networking page.<sup>18</sup> The people most likely to engage in such behavior were those aged twenty-five through thirty-four. People aged eighteen to twenty-four and thirty-five to forty-four also had a higher tendency to share news content on their social media profile. That said, older respondents, those aged forty-five to fifty-four and fifty-five to sixty-four, evidenced the greatest degree of growth from 2010 to 2012. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.13 demonstrate that the change in the percent of older users sharing news on their page is meaningful.

Figure 3.13

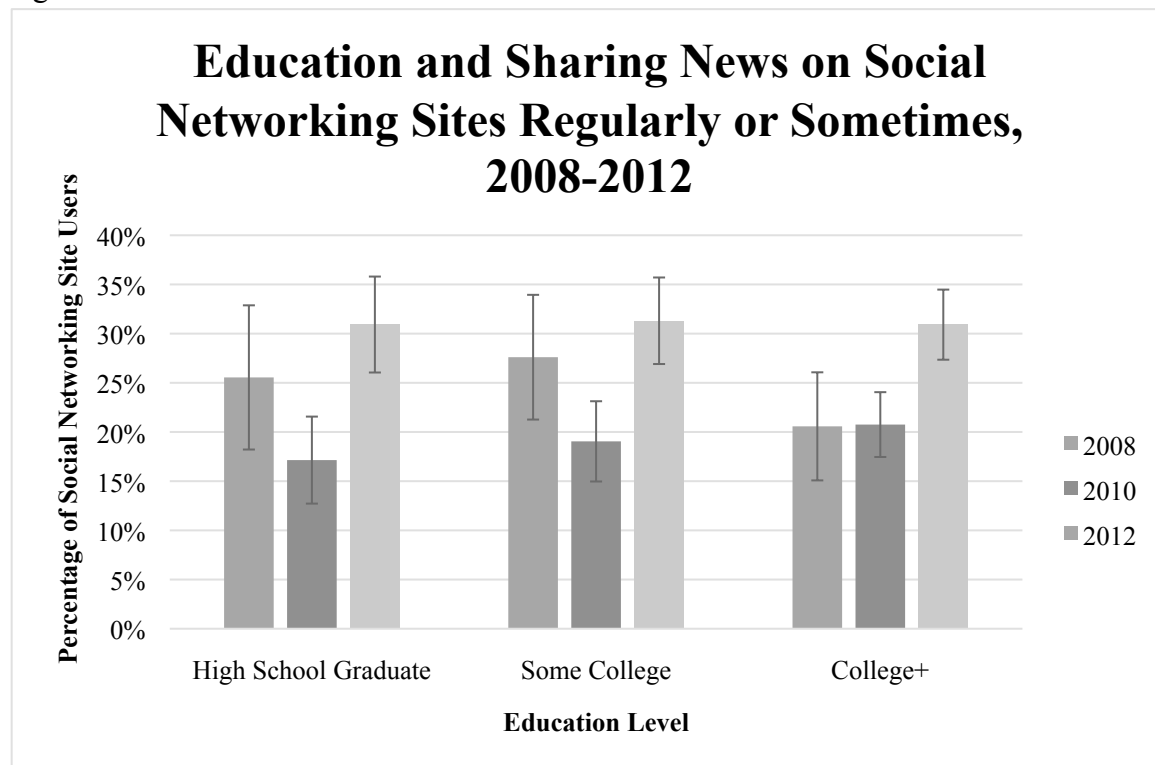


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

<sup>18</sup> An insufficient number of data points was available from the 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey, so those results are not included here. Additionally, there was not enough information available for respondents aged sixty-five and older, so that category is omitted in Figure 3.13.

Figure 3.14 compares respondents' educational attainment with their professed frequency of posting news information on their social networking profile. The results are rather interesting. In 2008, high school graduates and those with some college background were, on average, more likely than those with a Bachelor's degree or more to share news content on social media. However, the percent of those with a high school degree or some college attainment engaging in this behavior dropped fairly seriously in 2010. Meanwhile, the number of people with an undergraduate degree or more sharing news on their social networking site profile held fairly steady from 2008 to 2010. Perhaps, this difference is related to the election cycles that took place during the years surveyed by the Pew Research Center. In 2008, less educated individuals may have been more engaged in sharing news on their social media page because they were excited by the presidential election cycle. In 2010, they may have been less enthusiastic about the congressional midterm elections and, therefore, were less likely to post such information. By 2012, all groups evidenced a roughly equal tendency to share news on their social networking pages. 2012, again, was a presidential election cycle. Other explanations may also be suggested to account for this interesting difference.

Figure 3.14



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Although relatively few people post news content on their social networking profile, they reach a large audience. This fact is made possible because one person sharing news information on his or her page reaches everyone in his or her social network. Therefore, it makes sense that many more people affirm seeing news on the social networking site to which they subscribe, than say they share such information themselves. Table 3.10 shows the responses to the 2008 through 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys regarding how frequently social networking site users see news information on these sites.<sup>19</sup> The data demonstrate that it is becoming increasingly likely that people view news content on these sites with some regularity. In 2008, only one in

<sup>19</sup> In 2008, "the question was worded: 'How often do you get information about local, national, or international news through social networking pages?' Also, the question was asked of those who said yes to this question: 'Do you have a profile on MySpace, Facebook or another social networking site, or not?'" (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76). In 2010, "the question asked how often you 'get news or news headlines through social networking sites.'" (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76). Finally, in 2012, respondents were asked, "How often, if ever, do you see news or news headlines on social networking sites?" (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76).

ten respondents said they regularly saw news on their social networking site. In 2010, sixteen percent said the same, but by 2012, thirty-six percent of social networking site users affirmed seeing news content on these sites. The change from 2010 to 2012 represents relatively dramatic growth. Likewise, the number of people who see such news on social networking sites sometimes has also grown. In 2008, only a fifth of respondents said they were exposed to news on social media sometimes. By 2012, almost thirty percent said the same. Meanwhile, the number of people who see such news infrequently, if at all, has meaningfully decreased. In 2008, twenty-seven percent of respondents said they hardly ever see news on social networking sites. In 2012, only twenty-two percent said the same. Even more dramatic, though, is the decrease in the number of users saying they never see news on social networking sites. In 2008, over forty percent of respondents said they are not ever exposed to news on social media. In 2012, only thirteen percent of participants said the same. This represents a change of thirty percentage points. Table 3.10, therefore, provides a nice illustration of the fact that social networking sites are increasingly becoming forums for sharing news information.

Table 3.10  
Social Networking Site Users Seeing News on the Site, 2008-2012

	2008	2010	2012
Regularly	10%	16%	36%
Sometimes	20%	26%	29%
Hardly ever	27%	22%	22%
Never	43%	36%	13%
	[574 respondents]	[1,264 respondents]	[1,512 respondents]

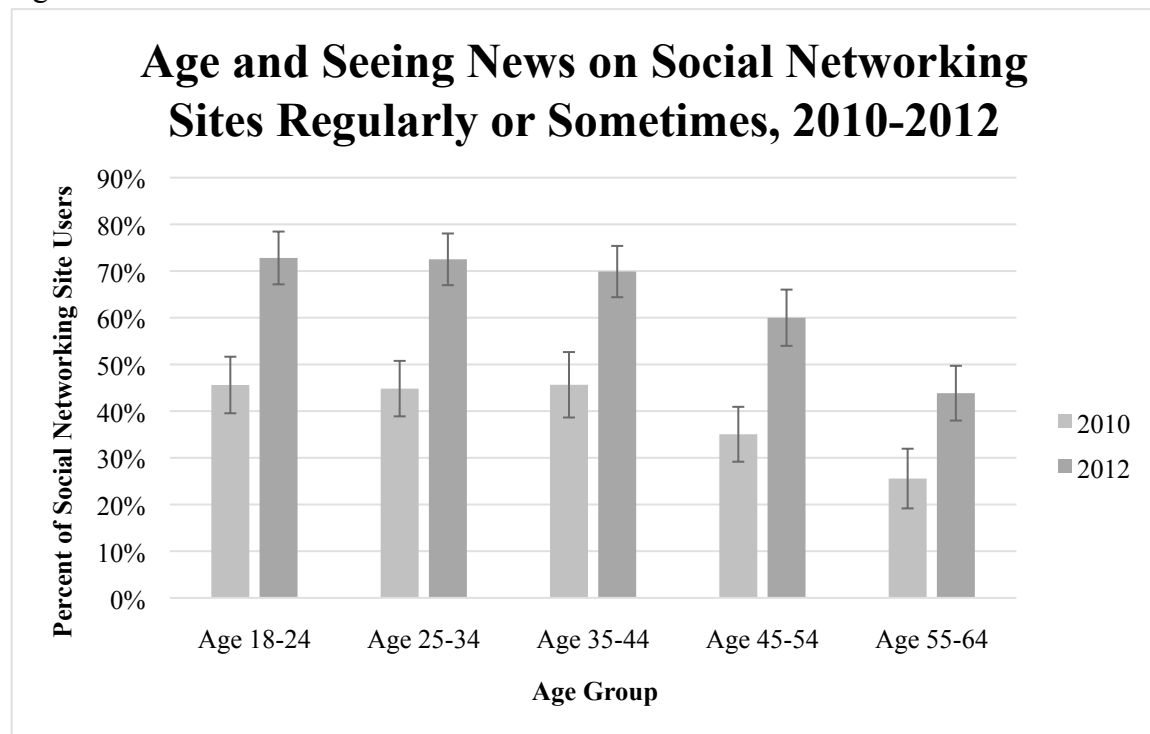
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008-2012

Certain social networking site users are more likely than others to see the news information, which their friends and acquaintances post. Age is, again, an important factor. Younger respondents are more likely than older ones to say that they see such content. Figure 3.15 depicts the age groups of participants in the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys who say they regularly or sometimes are exposed to news on social networking sites.<sup>20</sup> The eighteen to twenty four, twenty-five to thirty four, and thirty-five to forty four categories all evidence roughly the same percentage of respondents seeing news on social networking sites regularly or sometimes. The forty-five to fifty-four category, however, has fewer respondents being exposed to news content on such sites. Finally, the fifty-five to sixty-four age bracket evidences the smallest number of survey participants seeing news information on social media sites. Younger people are, therefore, more likely than older people to be exposed to news on social networking sites.

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<sup>20</sup> An insufficient number of data points was available from the 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey, so those results are not included here. Additionally, there was not enough information available for respondents aged sixty-five and older, so that category is omitted in Figure 3.15.

Figure 3.15



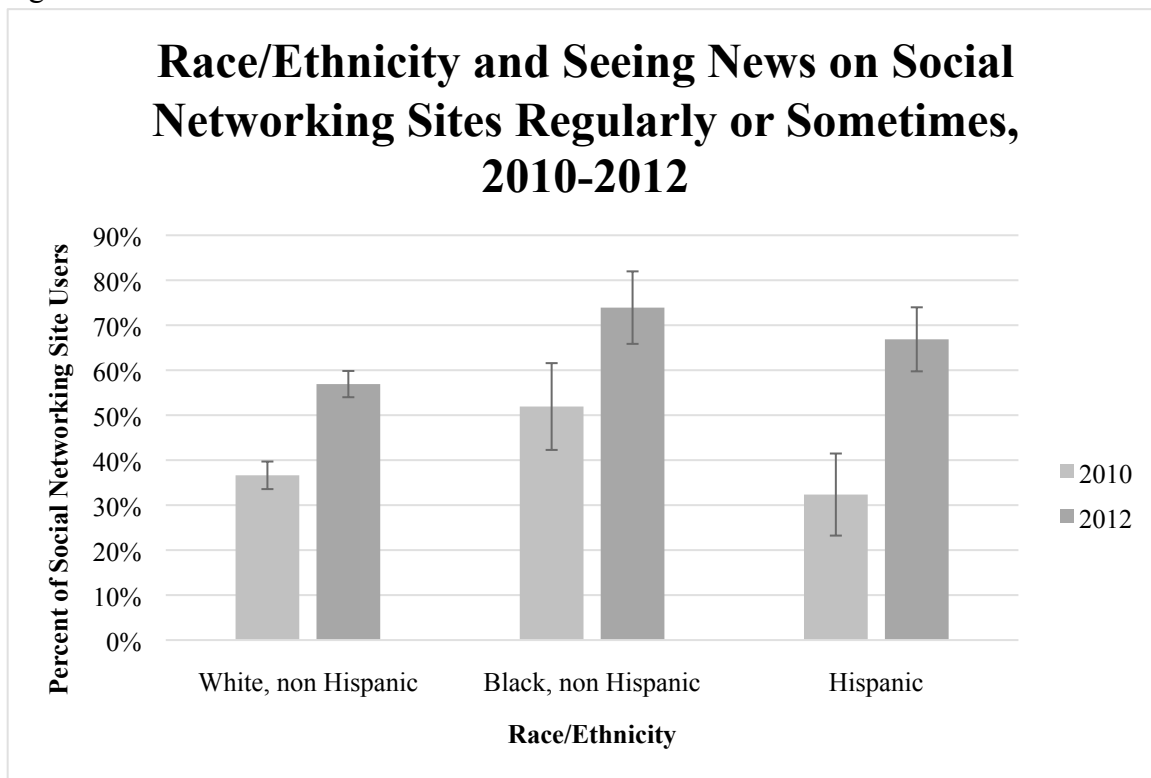
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Additionally, race plays an important role in whether or not social networking site users are exposed to news on such sites. Figure 3.16 compares race and ethnicity with the frequency with which respondents to the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys are exposed to news content on social networking sites.<sup>21</sup> The data shows that African Americans are much more likely to see news on such sites than Caucasians or Hispanics are. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.16 demonstrate that the differences in average responses are meaningful. The trend holds in both 2010 and 2012.

<sup>21</sup> An insufficient number of data points was available from the 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey, so those results are not included here. Additionally, there was not enough information available for respondents who identify as "Other," so that category is omitted in Figure 3.16.



Figure 3.16



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

The data provided above illustrate a few important ideas. For one, a minority of people rely on social networking sites to share news with members of their network. Those who do tend to be young. That said, although only a small percent of respondents to the Biennial Media Consumption Surveys engage in such behavior, they affect a much broader population. Social networking sites users are increasingly being exposed to news content on these sites. Those most likely to be affected include African Americans and younger respondents.

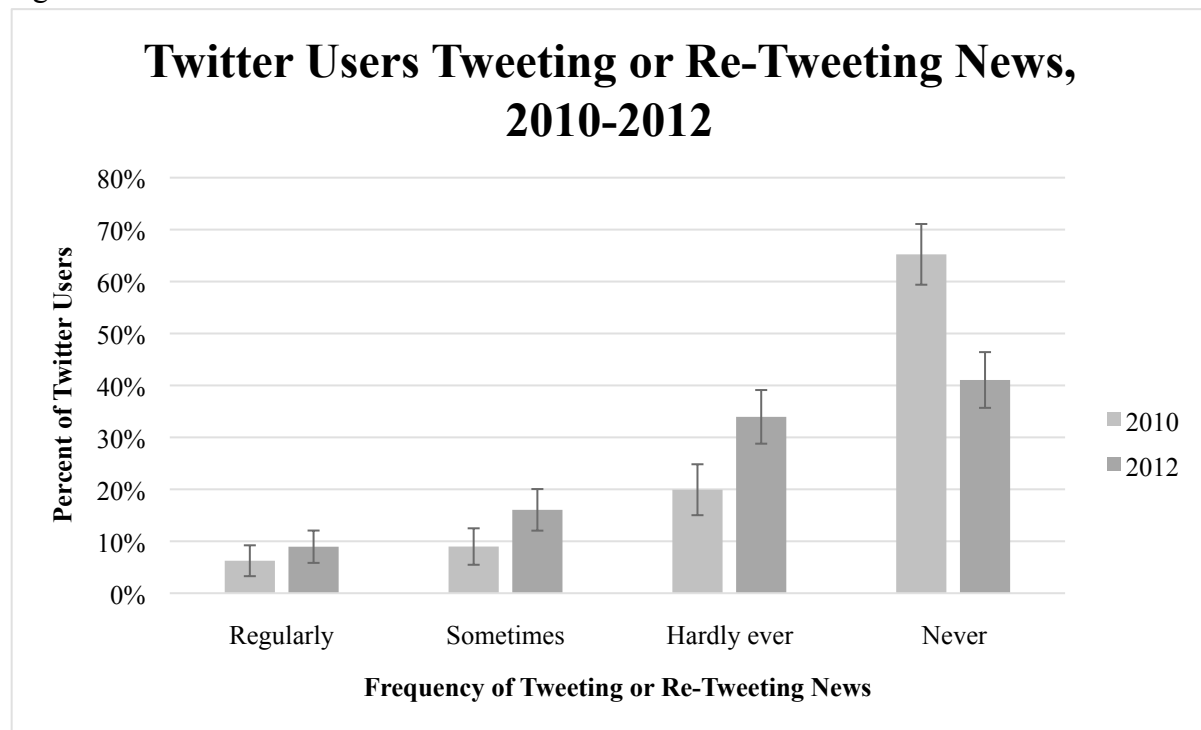
Like social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter allows users to post information. The main difference is that Twitter subscribers are allowed fewer characters with which to express themselves. Still, in one hundred forty characters, they can share news information and hyperlinks to articles. As with social networking sites, a minority

of Twitter subscribers actually tweet or re-tweet headlines. In 2010 and 2012, the Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents how often they use Twitter to share news information.<sup>22</sup> Table 3.17 shows their responses. It illustrates how, from 2010 to 2012, the percentage of subscribers who said they never tweet out news fell dramatically from sixty-five percent in 2010 to about forty-one percent in 2012. The “hardly ever” category appears to have absorbed much of that change, increasing from twenty percent in 2010 to thirty-four percent in 2012. Indeed, while in 2010, only fifteen percent of Twitter users said they regularly or sometimes tweeted or re-tweeted news, by 2012, that number had only increased to a quarter of Twitter users. It is important to mention the relatively few respondents upon which these data are based. Roughly 250 participants in the 2010 survey used Twitter, and that number only increased to about 325 respondents by 2012. Twitter is still a growing social media platform. However, the confidence intervals included in Figure 3.17 demonstrate that the differences in survey participants’ responses between 2010 and 2012 are meaningful.

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<sup>22</sup> In 2010, “the question asked how often you ‘send news or news headlines through Twitter’” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76). In 2012, Pew used the phrasing, “How often, if ever, do you tweet or re-tweet news or news headlines through Twitter?” (Kohut et al., 2012, p. 76).

Figure 3.17

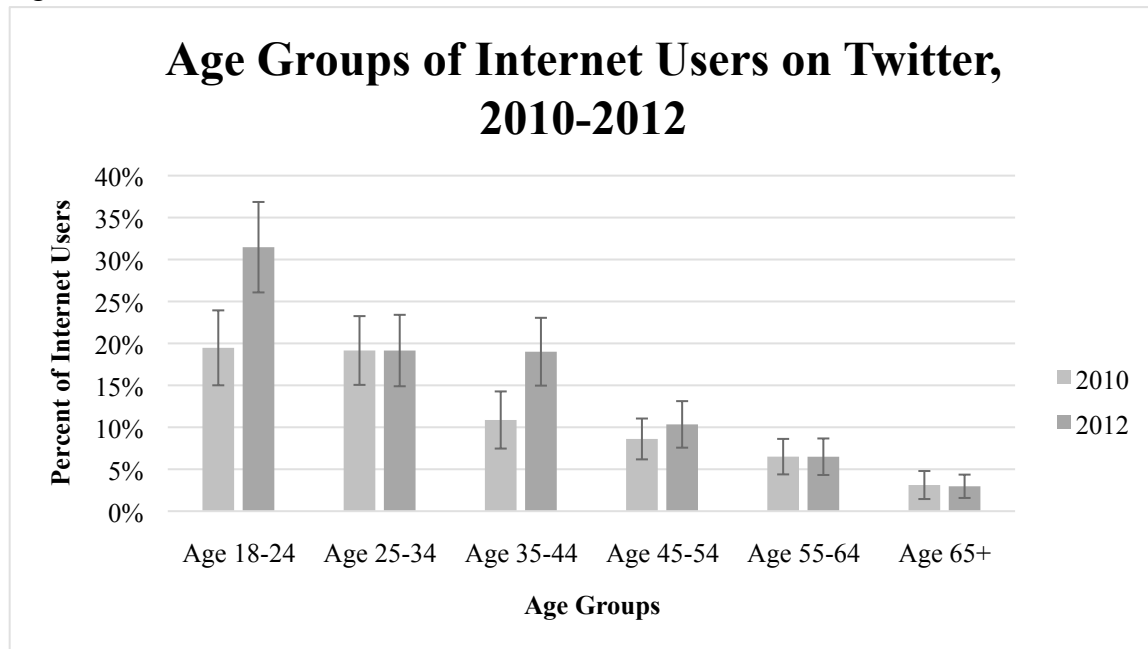


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Because Twitter has not yet achieved widespread penetration and because there are so few data points available from the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys, it is impractical to comment on the defining characteristics of those who tweet or re-tweet news or those who see such news information. That said, it is possible to look at Twitter users as a group. By and large, they are young. Indeed, age is the defining characteristic of Twitter subscribers. Figure 3.18 depicts the age groups of Internet users who have a profile on Twitter. It shows that the site has achieved the greatest level of penetration among those aged eighteen to twenty-four. Twitter is also popular among respondents aged twenty-five to thirty-four. Use of the site is growing among the cohort of younger respondents, those aged eighteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-four, thirty-five to forty-four, and forty-five to fifty-four. Meanwhile, penetration among older respondents is minimal and stagnant. In 2010 and 2012, less than seven percent of

individuals aged fifty-five to sixty-four said they had profiles on Twitter. Meanwhile, only three percent of respondents aged sixty-five and older said they used the social media site in both 2010 and 2012. Given the demographics of Twitter, it seems reasonable to conclude that on Twitter, younger people are the ones most likely to be exposed to news content on the social media site.

Figure 3.18



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

As with journalists, social networking sites are not the only avenue available to average individuals interested in engaging in gatekeeping among their friends and acquaintances. In addition to social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, opinion leaders may rely on email to share news content with their social network. By sending headlines via email, these people can play a more deliberate role in choosing who is exposed to information. Rather than just Facebook friends who may happen to attune to a given post, specific recipients are introduced to the selected news content. However, relatively few people engage in this behavior regularly. In 2006 and 2008, the Biennial

Media Consumption Survey asked respondents, “Have you ever sent a news story by email to a friend or associate?” Table 3.11 shows participants’ responses. Their answers demonstrate that a substantial minority – at least forty percent of Internet users – engages in this behavior. However, most of the people, who said they sent news, do so infrequently at best. Indeed, the majority of participants, who affirmed that they sent headlines via email, were part of the “less recently/don’t know when” category. Moreover, the “today or yesterday” and “past week” categories are relatively broad and could reasonably encompass both individuals who send news on a regular basis and those who just happened to do so recently.

Table 3.11  
Internet Users Emailing News, 2006-2008

	2006	2008
Yes, ever	40%	47%
<i>Today or yesterday</i>	---	7%
<i>Past week</i>	14%	7%
<i>Less recently/Don’t know when</i>	26%	33%
No	60%	53%
	[1,344 respondents]	[2,331 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2006-2008

The “Today or yesterday” response option was not provided in 2006. Therefore, data is not included.

The 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys ask a slightly different question so as to better tease out the frequency with which individuals email news information to their friends and colleagues. Because of the remarkable differences in response options, the data from the four surveys have not been consolidated into a single table, but rather two. Respondents in 2010 and 2012 were queried, “How often, if ever,

do you send news or news headlines by email?” As before, the majority of people – six in ten – said they never engaged in such behavior. Here, though, the frequency breakdowns provide a clearer picture. Approximately forty percent of Internet users send news via email, but in both 2010 and 2012, only four percent said they did so with any regularity. The plurality of the people who send news via email actually do so “hardly ever.” Table 3.12 provides a more specific breakdown. Most importantly, it places the data from Table 3.11 in context.

Table 3.12  
Internet Users Emailing News, 2010-2012

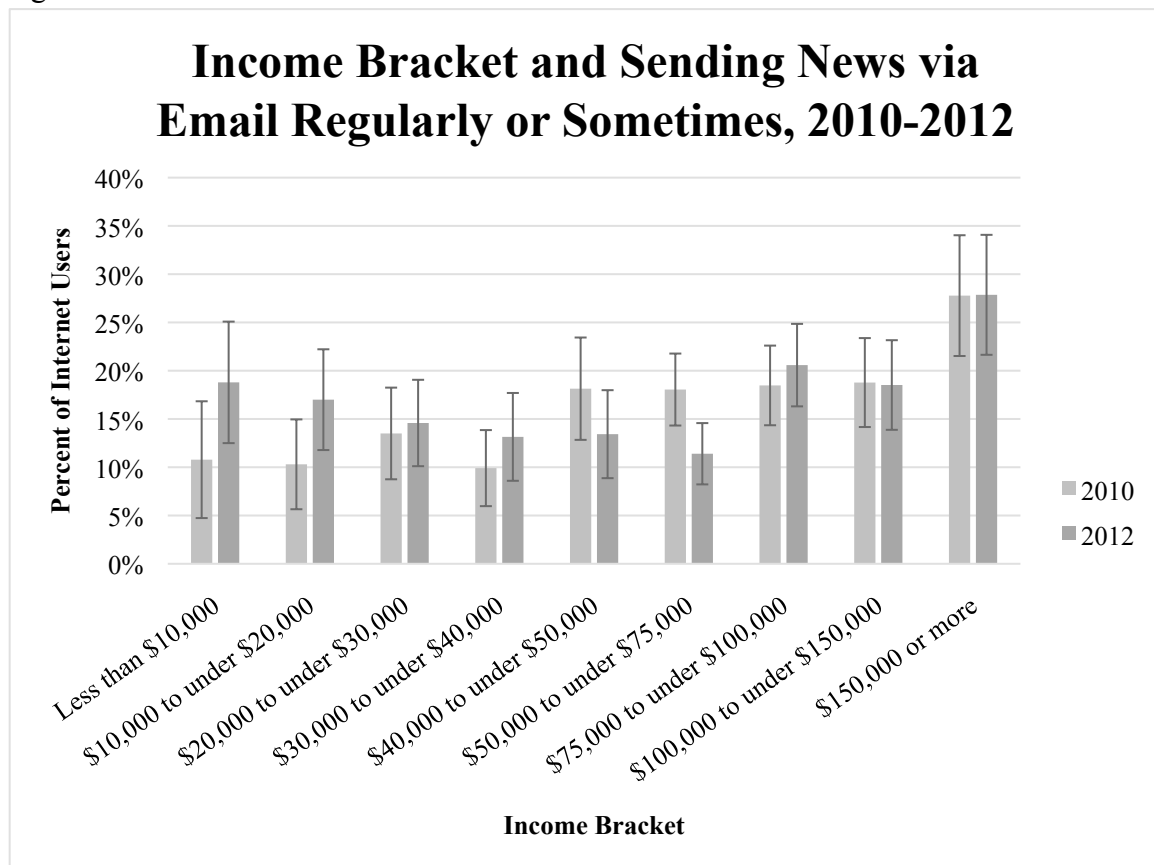
	2010	2012
Regularly	4%	4%
Sometimes	13%	12%
Hardly ever	23%	23%
Never	60%	60%
	[2,474 respondents]	[2,565 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Certain characteristics define the individuals most likely to send news via email to the people in their social circle. For one, they tend to be wealthy. Figure 3.19 compares the income brackets of the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey respondents saying that they regularly or sometimes share news by email. Given that individuals are distributed across nine different categories, thereby making fewer respondents per group, confidence intervals are included to provide a better estimate of the true average of each income bracket. The intervals demonstrate that the differences between people earning less than \$10,000 per year through those making under \$150,000 could reasonably be negligible. One category sticks out, though. Individuals earning over

\$150,000 are much more likely to email headlines to people in their network. Over a quarter of them attest to engaging in such behavior in both 2010 and 2012. All hovering around or below twenty percent, no other category evidences such high averages. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.19 indicate that these differences are meaningful.

Figure 3.19

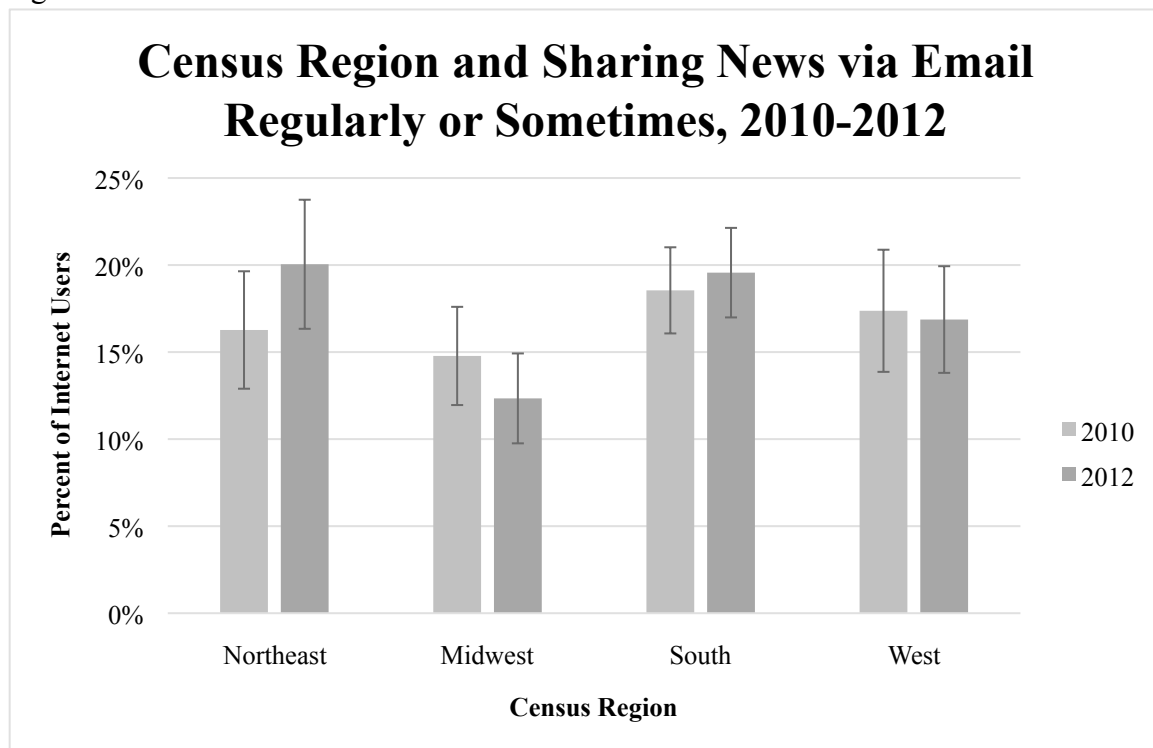


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Another important trait of those who tend to email headlines to their social networks is their geographic location. Figure 3.20 depicts the census regions of 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey participants who regularly or sometimes share news via email. The graph demonstrates some differences in 2010 averages among the four different regions of the U.S., though the confidence intervals included indicate that

such discrepancies could be negligible. Of interest, however, are the changes from 2010 to 2012 among the various regions. According to the data, respondents in the Northeast and South were increasingly likely to attest to sending news emails. Meanwhile, fewer individuals from the Midwest said they regularly or sometimes share headlines via email in 2012 than in 2010. The answers for people from the West stayed roughly static from 2010 to 2012. The confidence intervals provided show that the changes are not negligible. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that people from the Northeast and South are more likely than individuals from the Midwest and West to send news to their friends and acquaintances via email.

Figure 3.20



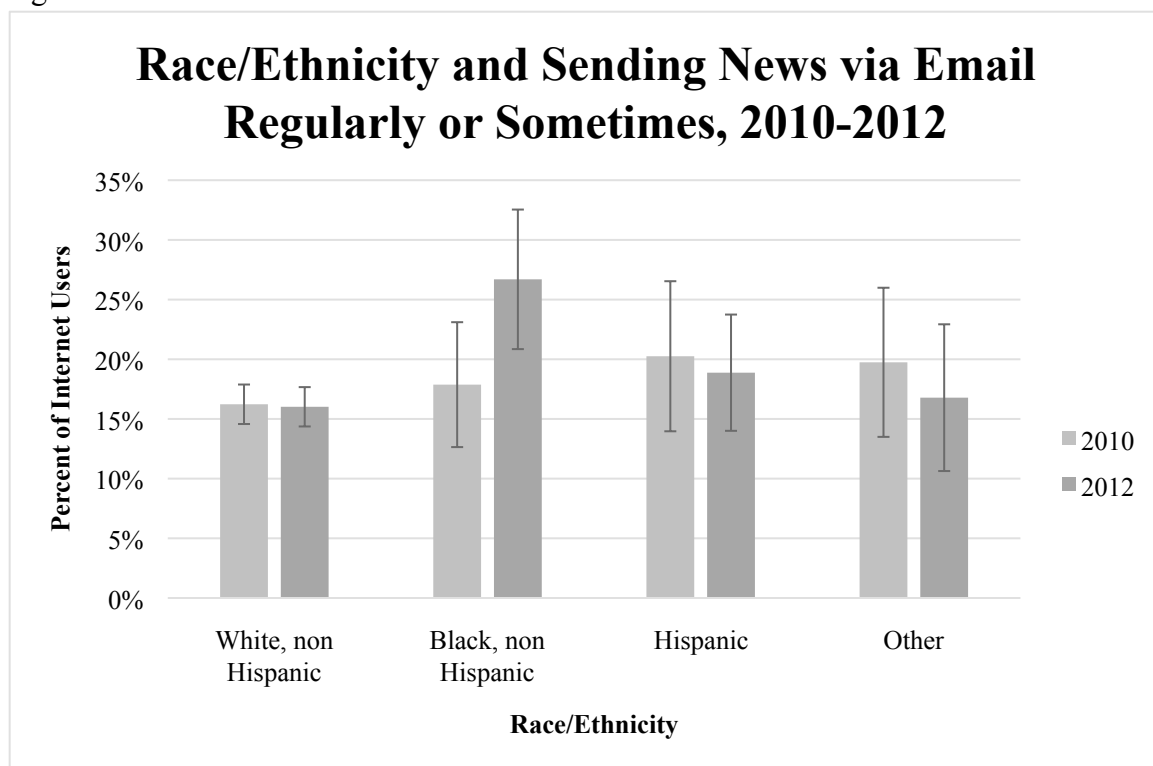
Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Race also plays a role in determining a respondent's probability of sending headlines via email. Figure 3.21 compares individuals' race and ethnicity with whether they regularly or sometimes email news to their friends and acquaintances. The data



demonstrate that Caucasian respondents are the least likely to send news headlines via email. Furthermore, the graph shows that the average number of African American respondents emailing news to their social networks with some degree of frequency has increased remarkably from 2010 to 2012. Meanwhile, the percent of people who identify as Hispanic or Other saying the same has decreased slightly over that time period. African Americans are, therefore, the most likely to send news headlines via email.

Figure 3.21

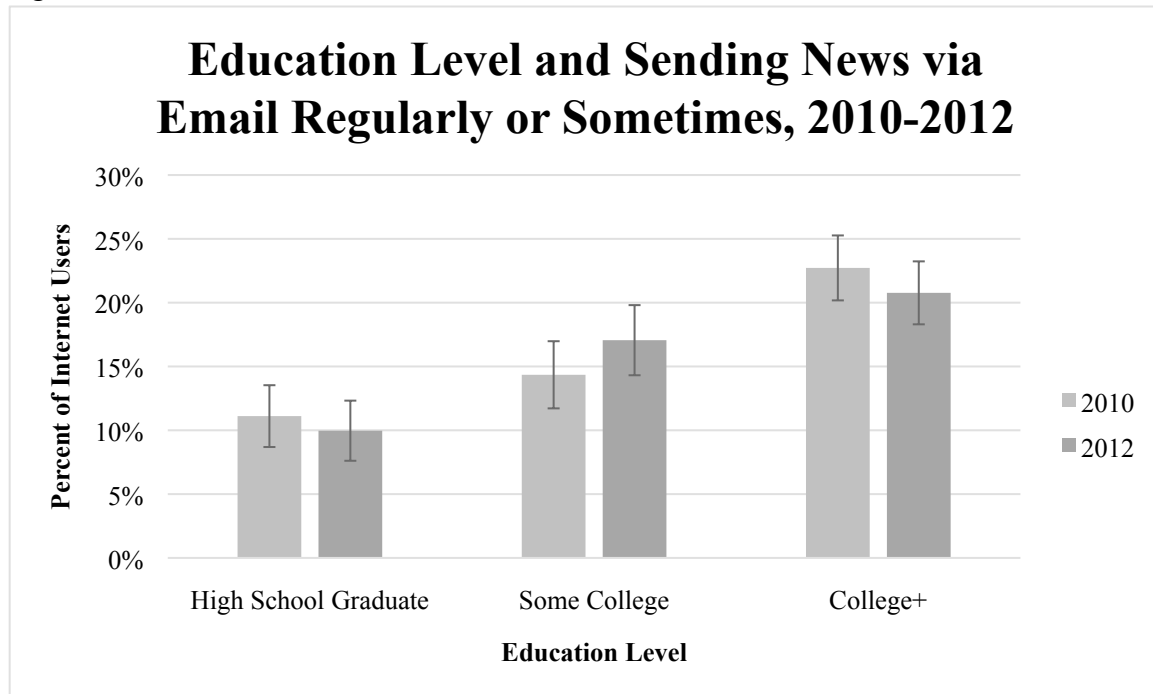


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Another predictor of someone's probability of emailing news to their friends and acquaintances is their level of educational achievement. Figure 3.22 compares educational background with whether or not respondents to the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey attest to sending news via email regularly or sometimes. The data demonstrate that people with a Bachelor's degree or more are the most likely to send out news via email to individuals within their social circle. Additionally, people with

some college training are more likely than those with just a high school degree to affirm sending out news headlines via email. Figure 3.22, therefore, shows that the more educational training a person has, the more likely he or she is to send out news to people in their social circle.

Figure 3.22

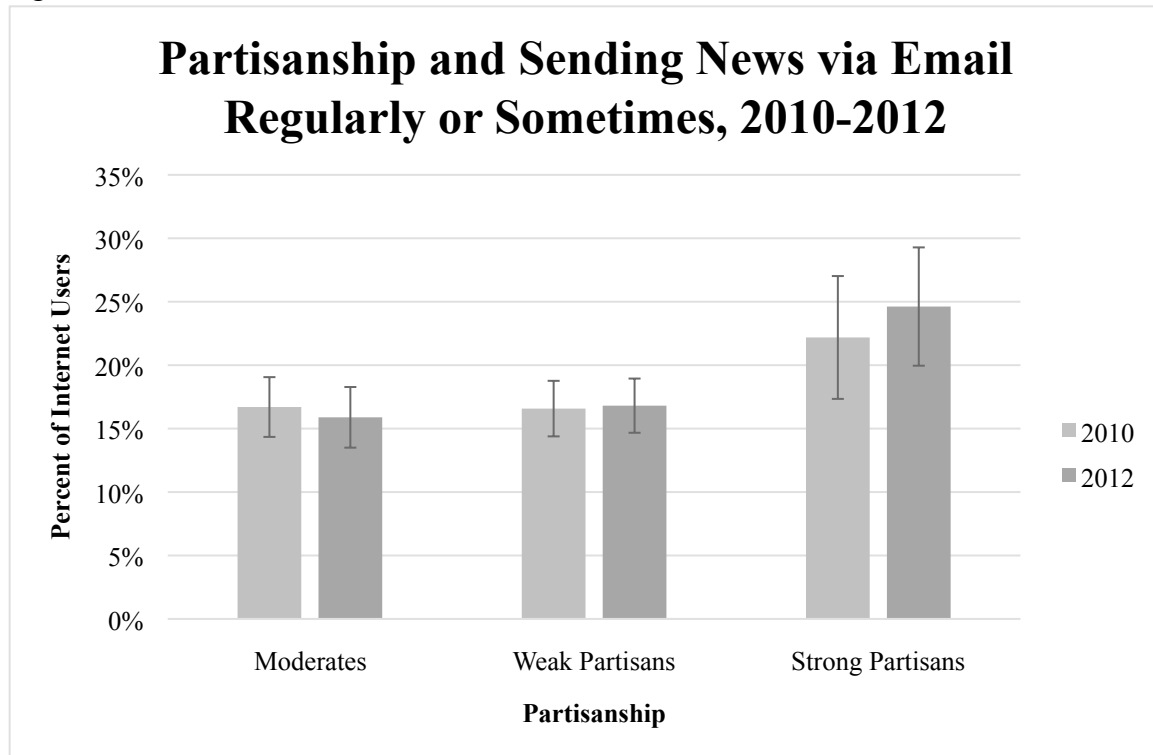


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Finally, Figure 3.23 represents the data most interesting to the present study. It compares partisan identification with 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey participants' responses as to whether they regularly or sometimes send news via email to people in their social network. The data demonstrate very little difference between moderates and weak partisans. Strong partisans, however, are much more likely to send news headlines via email. Indeed, they were even more likely to do so in 2012 than in 2010. Figure 3.23, thus, shows that the most politically polarized Americans are the ones with the highest probability of attempting to send news information via email, of

attempting to act as opinion leaders and influence the people with whom they are connected.

Figure 3.23



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

The graphs above illustrate a few of the important features of the people who generally send out news headlines via email. They are likely to be very wealthy. They are primarily from the East Coast, either the Northeast or the South. Additionally, they are more likely to identify as African American. They probably have a reasonably high degree of educational attainment, and most importantly, they are more likely to be a strong partisan.

Of course, it is just as important to understand who these opinion leaders are affecting by sending news clippings via email. In 2006 and 2008, the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents whether they received

news stories via email from friends or associates.<sup>23</sup> Table 3.13 provides survey participants' answers to this question. The data demonstrate that on average in 2006, six in ten individuals were emailed news headlines. That number had increased to almost seven in ten people by 2008. A substantial majority of people are, therefore, affected by this practice. That said, it seems that the majority of the increase from 2006 to 2008 is reflective of an increase in individuals saying that they receive such news headlines infrequently. Indeed, the "Less Recently, Don't know when" category has absorbed much of the change in the "No" category.

Table 3.13  
Internet Users Receiving News via Email, 2006-2008

	2006	2008
Yes, ever	61%	68%
<i>Today or yesterday</i>	---	12%
<i>Past week</i>	26%	15%
<i>Less recently/Don't know when</i>	35%	41%
No	38%	32%
	[1,344 respondents]	[2,331 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2006-2008

The "Today or yesterday" response option was not provided in 2006. Therefore, data is not included here.

As with the query about sending news via email, the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys ask a slightly different question from the 2006 and 2008 surveys regarding whether or not respondents receive news via email. Doing so better teases out the frequency with which individuals email news information to their friends

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<sup>23</sup> In 2006 and 2008, respondents were first asked, "Have you ever received a news story in your email from a friend or associate?" If they responded affirmatively, surveyors then queried, "Has this happened in the past week?" In 2008, if an affirmative answer was again given, then respondents were asked, "Did this happen today or yesterday, or not?"

and associates. Because of the meaningful differences in response options, the data from the four surveys have not been consolidated into a single table, but rather two. In 2010 and 2012, participants were asked, “How often, if ever, do you get news or news headlines by email?” Table 3.14 provides the breakdown of the responses to this question. In 2010 and 2012, more respondents said they never receive news headlines via email, than did in 2006 and 2008. The difference could be related to the change in response options, though. In 2006 and 2008, slightly less than thirty percent of respondents said they had been sent news headlines via email in the past week. Meanwhile, in 2010 and 2012, slightly more than thirty percent said they receive news content via email regularly or sometimes. These two answers seem roughly congruent both in the response option provided and the percent of participants answering affirmatively. Meanwhile, the difference between the “Hardly ever” response and the “Less recently/Don’t know when” response appears more consequential. Indeed, most of the increase in the “Never” category in 2010 and 2012 seems to have come from fewer people saying they received news headlines via email infrequently. Therefore, it is unclear if the changes between Tables 3.13 and 3.14 are meaningful.

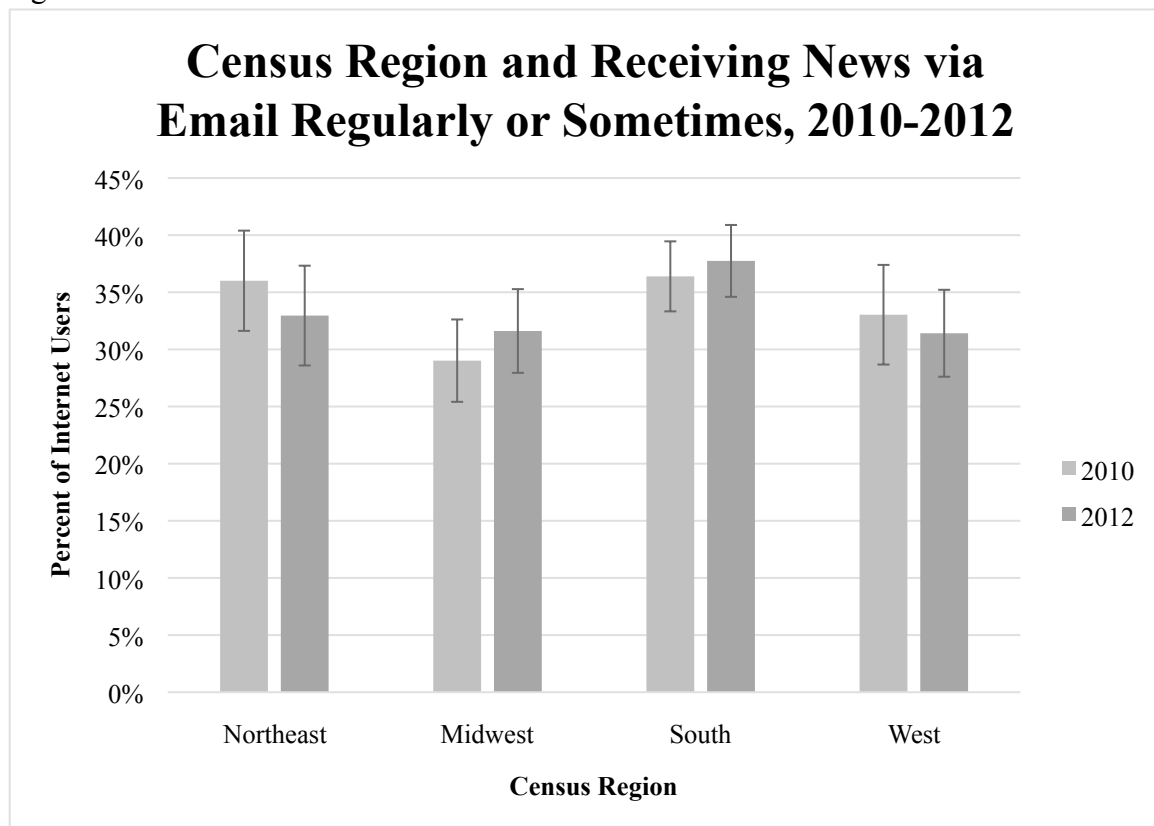
Table 3.14  
Internet Users Receiving News via Email, 2010-2012

	2010	2012
Regularly	14%	15%
Sometimes	18%	17%
Hardly ever	24%	21%
Never	43%	46%
	[2,474 respondents]	[2,565 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center’s Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

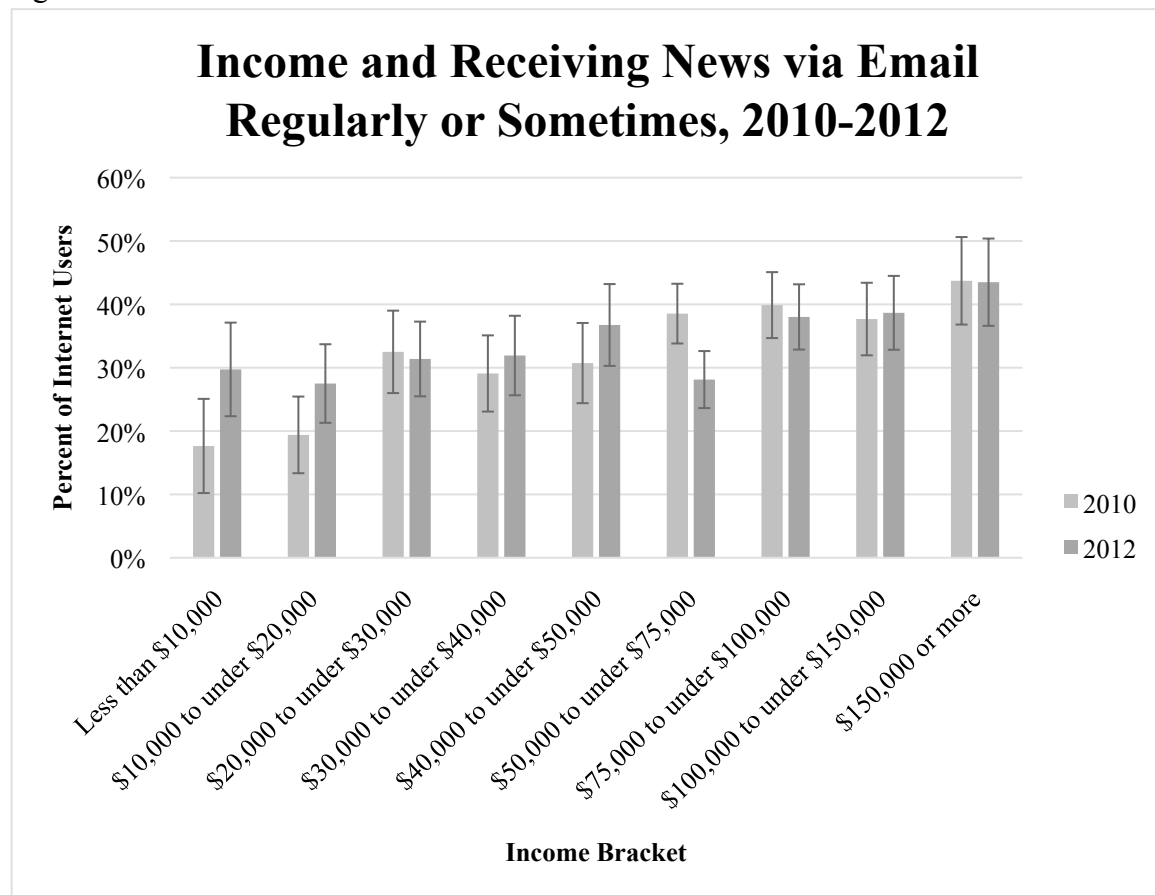
As before, certain people are more likely than others to be the recipients of news headlines via email. For one, they tend to be from the East Coast, specifically the Northeast and South. Figure 3.24 depicts the census regions of 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey participants who say they regularly or sometimes are emailed news content. Additionally, they are, on average, wealthier. Figure 3.25 compares income brackets with the number of survey participants who regularly or sometimes receive news headlines via email. The data show that people making \$50,000 per year or more are consistently more likely to be emailed news content than less wealthy individuals are.

Figure 3.24



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

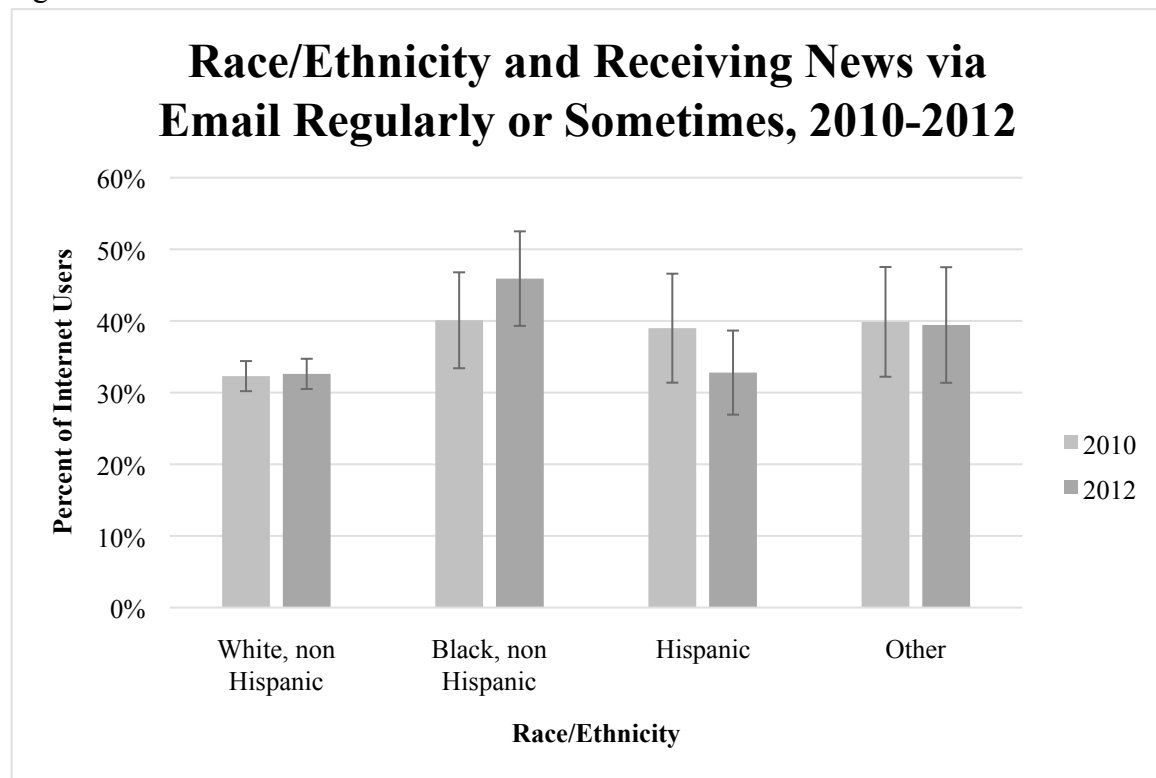
Figure 3.25



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Another defining characteristic of these individuals is their race. Figure 3.26 compares respondents' race/ethnicity with whether or not they are regularly or sometimes the recipients of emails containing news content. The graph demonstrates that African Americans are the most likely to be emailed news headlines. Indeed, the data demonstrate that from 2010 to 2012, an increasing number of them were the recipients of news-related emails. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.26 demonstrate that the difference between blacks and other racial groups is a meaningful one.

Figure 3.26

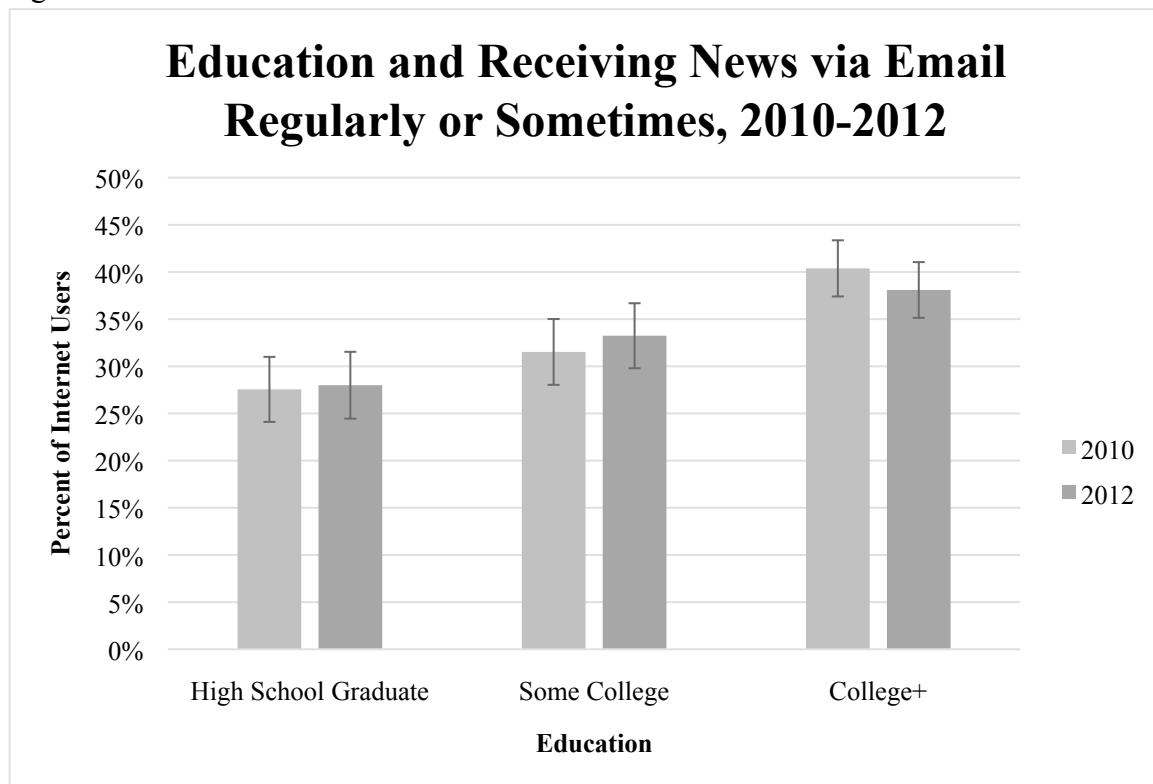


Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Educational attainment also helps differentiate the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey respondents most likely to regularly or sometimes be emailed news content. Figure 3.27 depicts these individuals' educational achievement. It shows that people with a Bachelor's degree or more have the highest probability of receiving news headlines via email. Additionally, people with some college training are more likely than those with only a high school diploma to be on the receiving end of such emails. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.27 demonstrate that the differences between these three categories are meaningful.



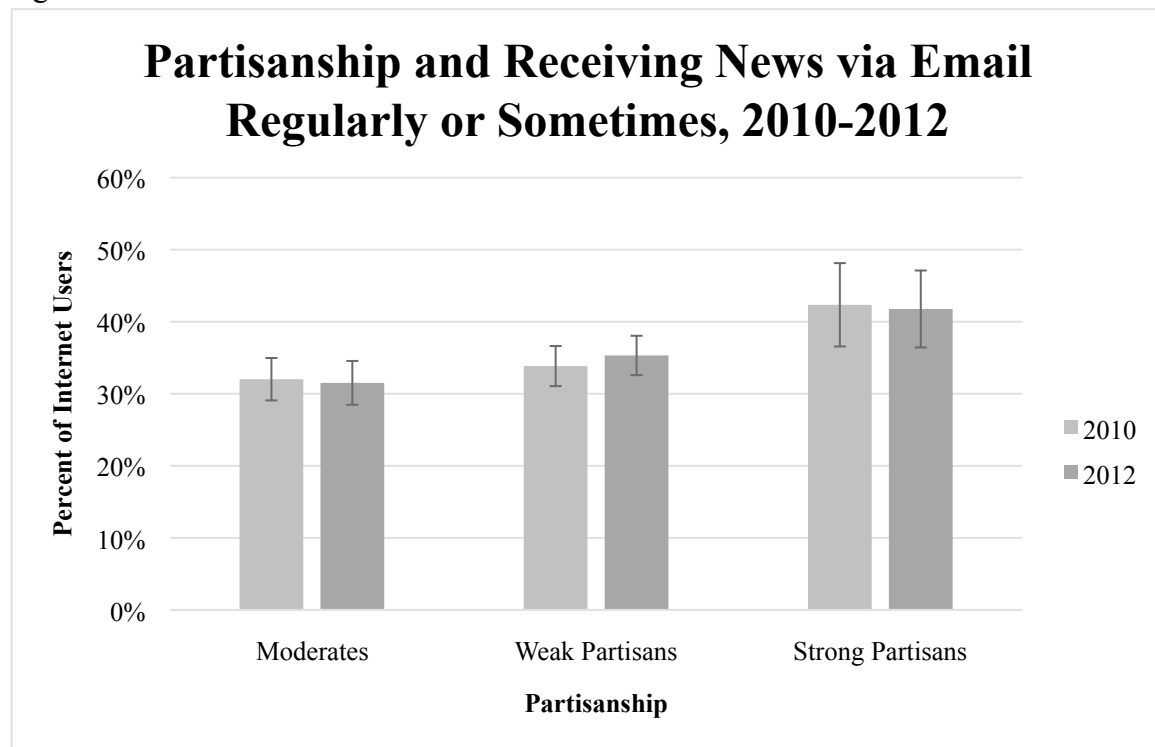
Figure 3.27



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

Finally, with regard to the present study, the most important predictor of whether an individual is likely to be a recipient of news-related emails is partisan identification. Figure 3.28 compares 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Survey participants' partisanship with whether or not they regularly or sometimes receive news headlines via email. The data demonstrate that moderates and weak partisans are about equally likely to say that they are emailed news content. Meanwhile, strong partisans have a much higher probability of being on the receiving end of news-related emails. The confidence intervals included in Figure 3.28 show that the differences between strong partisans and the other two groups is meaningful.

Figure 3.28



Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2010-2012

The graphs above depict the key features that define individuals who frequently receive news-related emails. By and large, they are from the East Coast and are wealthy. These individuals are more likely to identify as African American, and they tend to be well educated. Finally, they recipients of emails containing news content are generally strong partisans. These traits accord with those of the individuals who send headlines via email. This fact is generally unsurprising, though it does bear implications for the types of people likely to be affected by the content being distributed by opinion leaders.

The preceding section has considered the average individuals who use the Internet to act as opinion leaders within their social circles. Through email and social media, they help expose their friends and acquaintances to news content. Relatively few people take on the role of opinion leader, but the ones who do have an outsize impact on Internet users generally. Many more people attest seeing news on social networking sites or via

email than actually say they share such content themselves. Being exposed to news by others is not the only manner in which individuals access information, though. The following section will consider the individuals who rely on direct access to acquire content.

### *Direct Access*

Direct access of news websites remains a relatively popular method of information acquisition. Although it requires advance knowledge of a page's URL, it is both a simple and direct way of getting to specific, desired content. The 2006 Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked respondents who had visited a newspaper's online platform how they reached the site.<sup>24</sup> Table 3.15 illustrates their responses. Participants were able to indicate multiple methods of access. Therefore, the answers overlap, summing to a number greater than one hundred. Still, the most common way of reaching a newspaper homepage was simply by entering the site's URL into the browser's address bar. Granted, only 307 respondents answered this question, so its results may not be entirely representative or generalizable.

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<sup>24</sup> The specific question asked was: "How did you end up at newspaper websites yesterday? Did you [INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE] a. Go to the newspaper's homepage to browse the paper or look for something; b. Follow a link to a newspaper article from another website or search engine; c. Get an e-mail from a friend or associate that had a link to a newspaper story?"

Table 3.15  
Accessing Newspaper Websites, 2006

	Yes	No
Go to the newspaper's homepage to browse the paper or look for something	64%	35%
Follow a link to a newspaper article from another website or search engine	39%	60%
Get an email from a friend or associate that had a link to a newspaper story	12%	88%

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2006

The 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Survey asked a similar question, though, to which 2,140 respondents replied. These individuals were queried, "Thinking about the news you get online, what do you do more often: follow links to specific news stories from websites, search engines, or emails; go directly to the home pages of news organizations; or both?" Before considering the discrepancies between responses to the two questions it is important to reflect upon the differences between the questions themselves. For one, in 2006, respondents were able to provide multiple answers. In 2008, they had to select which method they used "more often." Additionally, whereas the 2006 question differentiated between accessing news via email versus hyperlinks and search engines, the 2008 query lumped the three together. Finally, and perhaps, more importantly, the 2008 question had seven times as many respondents answer it as the 2006 one did. Because of these important differences in response options, the data are depicted in two separate graphs.

The results are almost identical, though. In 2006, a combined fifty-one percent said they accessed a newspaper homepage by way of a search engine, hyperlink, or email, and in 2008, exactly half of respondents said the same. Table 3.16 displays the results

from the 2008 survey. Here, only two in five respondents said they reached a newspaper's homepage by entering its URL in their address bar. This percentage is less than two-thirds of the 2006 answer. This discrepancy could reflect an interesting change over time, but it could just as easily represent issues associated with the differences in question wording or the small sample size of the 2006 question. Still, despite these differences, both the 2006 and 2008 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys evidence the remarkable popularity of direct access of websites as a method of news acquisition. Even according to conservative estimates, a substantial minority of respondents – two in five – report going directly to news organizations' websites in order to access news.

Table 3.16  
Accessing Newspaper Websites, 2008

Follow links to specific news stories from websites, search engines, or emails	50%
Go directly to the home pages of news organizations	41%
Both	4%

Dataset: Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2008

Unfortunately, the 2010 and 2012 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys did not ask respondents whether or not they access news platforms by directly navigating to such sites. Still, the data from the 2006 and 2008 surveys demonstrate that this method is an important form of news acquisition. Of course, this fact is not entirely surprising. In order to expose their friends and acquaintances to news content, opinion leaders have to obtain the information themselves first. Direct access remains an easy and viable way of doing so.

### *Conclusion*

The preceding chapter has looked at the ways in which people acquire news online. It considered direct access of news content, but paid special attention to the ways

in which gatekeepers, including both human and technological factors, influence Internet users' exposure to articles online. Gatekeepers have the power to drive traffic to specific content, and an understanding of who or what these forces are helps illustrate the effect that exposure to online news has on Americans. Now that the qualities of the gatekeepers themselves and the people they reach has been explicated, this study will turn to the actual impact news content has on voters.

*Chapter 4: Effects*

As established in Chapter 3, gatekeepers determine what people see. In doing so, they affect the very foundations of democracy by impacting the information, which society relies upon in establishing its values, precepts, and policies. More importantly, this content can affect two particular and fundamental things. The first is democratic debate. Online information and conversation forums may encourage rational debate and a virtual public sphere, as Polat (2005) suggested. Alternatively, it may enable vicious arguments, ad hominem attacks, and disengagement. Indeed, the public forums available online may simply cause partisans to become more entrenched in their position, rather than open to the counterpoints made by the other side. This digging in, combined with selective exposure to information, can contribute to the second potential phenomenon explored here – polarization. Political polarization “refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum... [and also encompasses] the increase in such opposition over time” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 693). The information space on the Internet has the power to affect both of these things – polarization and rational debate – but does it actually do so? The following chapter attempts to answer this question. It first discusses whether partisan polarization is actually occurring in the U.S. It then turns to the academic literature related to the effect the Internet has had on this phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, scholars disagree. The chapter concludes by analyzing data from the American Trends Panel on how the Web and online news consumption are impacting polarization and democratic debate.

*Political Polarization*

Political polarization in the United States has become a topic of growing interest among citizens, government officials, and political scientists alike, who all wonder whether the views of Americans are becoming increasingly bimodally distributed. Persistent gridlock in Congress and the seeming inability of Republicans and Democrats to compromise on important issues certainly belies the notion that there may be something to the theory of increased political polarization in America. Some scholars disagree. DiMaggio et al. (1996) actually contend that the U.S. is experiencing “dramatic depolarization in intergroup differences” (p. 738). Likewise, Fiorina et al. (2006) hold that attitude polarization is a myth.

Other studies disagree, finding evidence that partisan polarization is occurring in the U.S. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) test Fiorina et al.’s (2006) contention and show that over the past thirty or so years, Americans’ political beliefs have become increasingly bimodally distributed. They argue that today, “there are large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious and secular voters” (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, p. 554). Moreover, they show that such divergences in attitude are not limited to highly visible political figures or elites. Instead, they affect “a large segment of the public” (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, p. 542). Those who continue to maintain largely centrist opinions turn out to be the least politically engaged. According to Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), “The most interested, informed, and active citizens are much more polarized in their political views” (p. 554). Therefore, the ones most likely to vote, volunteer, and debate civic ideas are the ones with the most entrenched beliefs.



Abramowitz (2010) similarly contends that the United States is becoming more ideologically polarized. Relying on data from the American National Election Studies, he posits that polarization among the mass public has actually driven divisions among elites. The engaged and increasingly polarized citizenry serve as the party bases. Ideologically divided in response to demographic changes, these people, not redistricting, have contributed to the increasingly bimodally distributed attitudes among members of Congress, says Abramowitz (2011). McCarty et al. (2006) seem to agree. They look specifically at demographic shifts associated with income inequality and immigration. According to McCarty et al. (2006), these factors have engaged in a kind of “dance” with political polarization, with the two mutually fueling, contributing to, and causing each other. Levendusky (2009) also puts forth the idea of a cyclical relationship encouraging increased ideological divisions. He contends, however, that voters are just becoming better sorted into political parties. These shifts have implications beyond just semantic changes, though. According to Levendusky (2009), such sorting actually contributes to increasingly partisan behavior.

The research outlined above provide strong support for the idea of increasing political polarization in the U.S., though they all point to different causes for the phenomenon. A recent study by the Pew Research Center further bolsters the idea that the United States is moving toward a bimodal distribution of political attitudes. Its most important conclusion found that “Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades” (Dimock et al., 2014, p. 6). First and foremost, the study showed that Americans are becoming more ideologically consistent in response to a battery of

questions about their political beliefs. Over the past twenty years, therefore, the percent of people giving ideologically consistent answers to Pew surveys has more than doubled – going from ten percent of people in 1994 to twenty-one percent in 2014. This finding means that there are fewer conservative Democrats and fewer liberal Republicans. Unsurprisingly, overlap between the two parties has severely decreased. “Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican” (Dimock et al., 2014, p. 6).

This change would not be problematic if these individuals were still able to dialogue and work together. However, partisan hostility has similarly increased over this time period. According to Dimock et al. (2014), “most... intense partisans believe the opposing party’s policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being” (p. 6-7). Furthermore, these partisans believe that any negotiations between their party and its opponents should result in the other side giving up more (Dimock et al., 2014, p. 7). Such beliefs demonstrate that the increasing ideological consistency within the two major political parties is not without consequences for the successful functioning of the American system of government.

The research examined in this section indicates that political polarization is occurring in the United States. Such changes in ideology have obvious importance, given the current state of executive-legislative relations. Many factors can impact partisan polarization, and some of the research considered above suggest reasons as to why it is occurring. Interestingly, though, the widespread penetration of the Internet has coincided almost perfectly with the increase in attitude polarization, and some scholars do believe that the Web and online news consumption have contributed to political polarization. The

following section considers scholarly debate on the impact that the Internet has had on ideological changes in the American public.

### *Literature Review*

Broadly speaking, there are two scholarly camps in regard to the effect of online news consumption on American politics. The first holds that the effect has been largely negative. They contend three things – first, that online news consumption does follow patterns of ideological self-segregation; second, that online social networks are homophilous; and third, that online discussion forums are spaces filled with hyper-critical attacks, causing polarization. Meanwhile, the second camp finds the opposite, saying that the Internet has not had a negative impact on polarization and deliberative democracy. The academics representing this position marshal evidence, demonstrating that consumption of online news is not segregated along ideological lines and that online debates occur among heterogeneous social networks, benefiting participants. This study turns first to the former category.

### *Negative Effect*

Before the Internet achieved widespread penetration, many scholars worried about its potential echo chamber effect. This occurs when consumers only access and view content that speaks to their previously held beliefs and ideas. Sunstein (2002) specifically worried that the Web would encourage insular thinking and limit individuals' exposure to outside viewpoints. Of online news access, he wrote, "People restrict themselves to their own point of view – liberals watching and reading mostly or only liberals; moderates, moderates; conservatives, conservatives, Neo-Nazis, Neo-Nazis" and so on and so forth (Sunstein, 2002, p. 4-5). As this self-segregation of ideas and viewpoints occurs and

becomes ingrained, serious democratic discussion falls by the wayside and society suffers.

Research by Iyengar and Hahn (2009) serve as affirmation of the concerns articulated by Sunstein. Using a nationally representative sample of 1,023 registered voters, they found that “in an experimental setting, conservatives and Republicans preferred to read news reports attributed to *Fox News* and to avoid news from *CNN* and *NPR*, [while] Democrats and liberals exhibited exactly the opposite syndrome – dividing their attention equally between *CNN* and *NPR*, but avoiding *Fox News*” (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 19). Bennett and Iyengar (2008) expound on this idea. They contend that the Internet has the effect of narrowing people’s information acquisition as “most media users... rarely find themselves in the path of attitude-discrepant information” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 724). These studies demonstrate that contrary to the positions outlined by Garrett (2009), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), and Garrett et al. (2013), people do engage in partisan selective exposure on the Web.

The potential for selective exposure to online news bears importance beyond just its effect on limiting opportunities for democratic deliberation, as Sunstein (2002) suggested. Indeed, it can also affect partisan polarization. Using data collected by the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey, Stroud (2010) provides “strong evidence that partisan selective exposure is related to polarization” (p. 556). Her study provides support for worries that selective exposure to content, specifically that available online, plays a role in the increasingly bimodal distribution of Americans’ political beliefs. Nie et al. (2010) also consider this idea, comparing the partisan beliefs of people who watch cable news with those of people who supplement their cable news viewership with online news

sources. They “find that consumers of generally left-of-center (right-of-center) cable news sources who combine their cable news viewing with online sources are more liberal (conservative) than those who do not” (Nie et al., 2010, p. 428). Their study bolsters the idea that online news consumption in and of itself can contribute to ideological polarization.

Meanwhile, weblogs, an information source found exclusively on the Internet, serve as a kind of microcosm of these larger effects occurring in the online news space. Baum and Groeling (2008) find that the editorial choices of weblogs exhibited “greater partisan filtering” than that of traditional wire sources (p. 345). The researchers point out that their “findings offer a striking validation of those who complain about one-sided coverage of politics in the so-called blogosphere” (Baum & Groeling, 2008, p. 359). That being the case, readers looking for news coverage online are more likely to find partisan slanted pieces on weblogs. Blog authors also exhibit heightened partisanship through their interactions with other content producers. Adamic and Glance (2005) analyze the linking patterns among blogs during the 2004 presidential campaign. They find that weblogs primarily link to articles and homepages from within their partisan community. Indeed, content producers rarely provide hyperlinks to blogs that espouse a different political ideology. Research by Hargittai et al. (2008) confirms the findings of Adamic and Glance (2005). They demonstrate that “widely read political bloggers are much more likely to link to others who share their political views” (Hargittai et al., 2008, p. 67). In doing so, they limit the exposure that their audience members have to information representing other viewpoints, contributing to selective exposure.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly then, blog readers engage in selective exposure to online content. Analyzing survey data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Lawrence et al. (2010) show that weblog readers “gravitate toward blogs that accord with their political beliefs” (p. 141). Moreover, they avoid opinion-challenging weblogs. Perhaps as a consequence of such choices, blog readers are far more politically polarized than people who do not consume news via weblogs. They are also far more politically active in comparison with other Americans. Commenting on the implications of their findings, Lawrence et al. (2010) eloquently point out:

Deliberation entails a dialogue between opposing views, but blog authors tend to link to their ideological kindred and blog readers gravitate to blogs that reinforce their existing viewpoints. Both sides of the ideological spectrum inhabit largely cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance, thereby creating little opportunity for a substantive exchange across partisan and ideological lines. (p. 152)

The results of this study indicate that the most politically active Americans are the ones most unwilling to dialogue and compromise with their ideological opposites. Indeed, Lawrence et al.’s (2010) conclusions complement research on homophilous social networks.

Although Kim (2011), Kim et al. (2013), and Lee et al. (2014) contend that friend groups on social networking sites are largely heterogeneous, previous research have shown that offline social groups are clustered according to ideology (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). This idea receives further support from Gentzkow and Shapiro’s (2011) findings that people prefer to spend time with others who share their political views. Bond and Messing (2015) propose three reasons for this phenomenon. “First, clustering may be due to exposure to a shared environment” (Bond & Messing, 2015, p. 72). That is, a shared

background or external stimulus may cause people within a family or friend group to hold similar beliefs and ideas. “Second, clustering may be due to homophily” (Bond & Messing, 2015, p. 72). According to this idea, people choose friends based on mutually-held beliefs. Finally, “clustering may be due to influence” (Bond & Messing, 2015, p. 72). Over time, one person may convince his or her friend of the correctness of some idea, so that they both come to espouse the same ideology. Alford et al.’s (2011) study of romantic partners seems to endorse the second proposition offered. They find that “political attitudes display interspousal correlations that are among the strongest of all social and biometric traits. Further, it appears the political similarity of spouses derives in part from initial mate choice rather than persuasion and accommodation over the life of the relationship” (Alford et al., 2011, p. 362). Given that offline relationships form the basis of online relationships, such trends point to ideologically homophilous networks on social media.

Indeed, recent analysis of Facebook and Twitter networks evidence politically homogeneous clustering. In a study of over six million Facebook users and their friends, Bond and Messing (2015) show that people on that social networking site tend to associate with likeminded others. Meanwhile, Twitter does not seem to hold much more promise for users’ exposure to heterogeneous political ideas. According to Himelboim et al. (2013), Twitter discussions of topics, such as healthcare, immigration reform, political parties, and more, remain “confined to like-minded clusters of users” (p. 171). These studies show that popular social networking sites evidence homophilous groupings of individuals, thereby limiting the likelihood of and the potential for cross-ideological

deliberation. They provide a sharp refutation of the idea that online social networks include individuals representing a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs.

Furthermore, the quality of political interactions that do occur online are not always positive, as Price et al. (2002) and Huckfeldt et al. (2004) had suggested. Engaging in such discussions can actually be problematic. Conover et al. (2011) consider two political communication networks on Twitter, together comprising over 250,000 tweets from the weeks leading up to the U.S. elections in 2010. They note:

Qualitatively speaking, our experience with this body of data suggests that the content of political discourse on Twitter remains highly partisan. Many messages contain sentiments more extreme than you would expect to encounter in face-to-face interactions, and the content is frequently disparaging of the identities and views associated with users across the partisan divide. (Conover et al., 2011, p. 95).

Thus, rather than facilitating productive debate among ideologically opposed individuals, Twitter appears only to crystallize opinions and increase partisan hostility. In fact, discussion forums in general seem to suffer from this problem. For instance, Borah (2014) contends that “the political blogosphere is replete with uncivil discussions” (p. 809).

Research by other scholars demonstrates how the process of incivility leading to polarization works. According to Blitvich (2010), incivility “create[s] a sense of ‘us versus them,’” thereby making the out-group “undesirable” and enhancing ties within the in-group (p. 541). Impoliteness, thus, has a tendency to exacerbate in-group and out-group biases. With regard to politics, exposure to uncivil political debate can lead to “the increased salience of party identity” and the polarization of attitudes (Hwang et al., 2014, p. 623). Borah’s study of impolite political comments “show that individuals become less



open-minded and more certain about their attitudes, indicating” ideological polarization (p. 822). Moreover, frequent contributors to online discussion spaces tend to be uncivil, creating an “oligarchy of opinion” that discourages other users from joining the conversation and limits overall engagement (Schild & Oren, 2005; Blom et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate that discussion spaces online are more problematic than beneficial.

The negative approach, discussed above, demonstrates that online news consumption is segregated along ideological lines. It shows that the avoidance of attitude discrepant ideas contributes to partisan polarization. Moreover, it provides support for the idea that online social networks are clustered according to political beliefs. These homophilous social circles further hurt online deliberative discussion and lead to polarization. Of course, some academics disagree with this overly pessimistic outlook. The following section turns to their findings on the effect of online news consumption on political polarization.

#### *Not Negative Effect*

As the Internet has expanded access to online content and information, political scientists have wondered whether the increased variety of options will encourage people to rely only on information that accords with their previously-held views. Garrett (2009) examined individuals’ experience with online news content. By analyzing data collected by an online software program, he found that people do not limit their exposure to opinion-challenging news sources. Although opinion-reinforcing content, as self-described by participants, does increase news story exposure, “opinion-challenging information makes exposure only marginally less likely,” and the effects of these

characteristics are “modest”” (Garrett, 2009, p. 265). Furthermore, real-time evidence from the study finds that people do not abandon-opinion challenging information. As such, Garrett (2009), concludes that “people do not seek to exclude other perspectives from their political universe, and there is little evidence that they will use the Internet to create echo chambers, devoid of other viewpoints, no matter how much control over their political information environment they are given” (p. 279). His study shows that access to a wide variety of online news sources does not necessarily lead to ideological self-segregation.

Meanwhile, using data collected by com-Score, Mediamark Research and Intelligence, the 2006 General Social Survey, and the 1992 Cross-National Election Study, as compared with individuals’ self-reported partisan leanings, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) consider ideological segregation with regard to online news consumption, offline news consumption, and in-person social interactions. Their analysis shows that partisan segregation of online news consumption is relatively low. Indeed, it is only greater than the ideological segregation of traditional news consumption and is significantly lower than the segregation of in-person social interactions.

Large news organizations appear to attract a rather general audience. For instance, thirty percent of nytimes.com visitors are self-described conservatives; forty-five percent are self-described liberals; and the remaining twenty-five percent are self-described moderates (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1814). Likewise, thirty-three percent of cnn.com viewers are self-reported conservatives; twenty-seven percent liberals; forty-three percent moderates (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1814). Some prominent news websites demonstrate greater ideological homogeneity. For example, foxnews.com

consumers are seventy-six percent conservative, ten percent liberal, and fourteen percent moderate (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1814). Smaller, more ideological websites show significantly greater skew with regard to consumption patterns. The users of *billoreilly.com* and *rushlimbaugh.com*, for example, are ninety-nine and ninety-seven percent conservative, respectively (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1814). With people such as these, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) note, “Although their political views are relatively extreme, they also tend to consume more of everything, including centrist sites and occasionally sites with conflicting ideology. Their omnivorouness outweighs their ideological extremity, preventing their overall news diet from becoming too skewed” (p. 1832). These consumption patterns show that people rely on a diverse set of online news sources. Despite their partisan ideologies, people do not appear to eschew opinion-challenging information.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) also address a number of other important considerations. They note that the course of time appears to have no effect on ideological segregation. “If anything, segregation has declined as the Internet news audience has grown” (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1819). This observation is a remarkable conclusion, given other scholars’ concerns about the long-term negative effects of the Internet on ideological segregation. Additionally, their analysis raises important considerations as to the ideological segregation of individuals’ social networks. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) show that “interactions with acquaintances formed through voluntary associations, workplaces, neighborhoods, and families are more segregated than any news medium, as are interactions with trusted acquaintances and political

discussants” (p. 1816). Such ideologically segregated social networks may have more serious repercussions on the influence of opinion leaders as gatekeepers, though.

Finally, Garrett et al.’s (2013) study provides further support for the idea that Internet users consume news broadly, without reference to ideological slant. Their findings illustrate that reliance on ideologically consistent news sites is actually a “very strong positive predictor” of participants’ use of ideologically discrepant sites – actually “far larger than any other factor” (Garrett et al., 2013, p. 126). Therefore, “although people exhibit a confirmation bias, there is no evidence of a tradeoff between consonant and dissonant sources of information” (Garrett et al., 2013, p. 128). They continue to rely on both types of sources, a blow to the idea of active ideological self-segregation. That said, among strong partisans, use of ideologically consistent news sites is not as strong of a predictor of simultaneous reliance on ideologically divergent sources. This particular finding illustrates that the most partisan individuals in the American public sphere are, in fact, least likely to solicit news information that opposes their previously-held beliefs, though they do not avoid such content altogether.

Garrett (2009), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), and Garrett et al. (2013) work to show that Internet users do not avoid ideologically dissonant information online. Their studies demonstrate that despite initial scholarly concern, the Web has had the effect of increasing individuals’ exposure to a wide variety of sources and ideas. These studies represent only part of the net-positive camp, though. Other political scientists have endeavored to show that Internet users operate within ideologically heterogeneous social networks. These broad and varied social circles are supposed to expose individuals to

cross-cutting opinions and ideas. Rational deliberation then flourishes, benefiting those who participate.

A number of studies have provided support for the supposition that social networks online include people of many different opinions and ideas. Using data collected in 2008 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, Kim (2011) “found a positive and significant relationship between [social networking site]... use and exposure to cross-cutting points of view” (p. 975). Such results validate the idea of heterophilous social networks. Kim (2011) notes that his “findings imply that social network sites contribute to expanding individuals’ exposure to political difference in general, which is consistent with optimistic views on the role of the Internet in enhancing democracy by, for instance, increasing the heterogeneity of political discussion networks, informing citizens, and facilitating political engagement (p. 975-976). Kim et al.’s (2013) study similarly showed that use of social media enables heterogeneity of networks, while Lee et al. (2014) concluded that regular social media use corresponds with greater exposure to diverse opinions. “As long as they are frequently on social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, users will have more diverse social networks on the [social networking sites]... rather than flocking to groups with only likeminded people/individuals” (Lee et al., 2014, p. 715). Such findings suggest that social circles online include people representing a broad range of backgrounds and ideas.

Discussion with those of different viewpoints is supposed to be extremely beneficial to democratic deliberation. According to Price et al. (2002), such conversations expand individuals’ “argument repertoire – [that is,] reasons people can give in support of their own opinions, as well as reasons they can offer to support opposing points of view”

(p.95). Thus, encountering contradictory ideas is important for “deliberative opinion,” ideas that are well-grounded in reason and consideration (Price et al., 2002, p. 107). Likewise, Huckfeldt et al. (2004) argue that “political conversations enhance the capacity of citizens to provide reasons for their support of a particular candidate” (p. 91). Specifically, they find that “citizens exposed to heterogeneous messages are less likely to hold a polarized attitude toward a candidate. In other words, they are more likely to develop an attitude toward the candidate that incorporates positive and negative assessments” (Huckfeldt et al., 2004, p. 92). Therefore, deliberation among heterogeneous social networks online has the power to improve the tone of politics today and make people better, more aware citizens.

Research conducted by scholars representing the “not negative” viewpoint presents a hopeful outlook for the effect of online news consumption on American society. The studies just outlined illustrate that people do not avoid information that supports an opposing ideology. Moreover, heterophilous social networks have the power to expose people to such content and even bring different sides together for constructive, rational debate. The following section considers data drawn from the Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel and from the Princeton Survey Research Associates International 2013 survey for the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, and generally provides support for the negative camp.

#### *Online News Consumption and Social Networks*

The types of people that individuals surround themselves with on social media bear importance for the online news these individuals see. As explained in Chapter 3, opinion leaders use social networking sites to promote ideas and content. Therefore, it

matters whether these networks are homophilous or heterophilous. The data presented here illustrates that online social networks are largely homophilous. There is a high degree of attitude concordance among survey respondents and their Facebook friends and Twitter followers with regard to single issue items. Still, because there are so many topics that make up government and politics, any two individuals can agree on most single issue items, while still disagreeing on a few subjects. As a result of this reality, homophilous social networks have the ability to expose people to a variety of viewpoints on different topics, such that, generally speaking, Facebook users might not often see posts that accord with their beliefs. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide support for this idea. Table 4.1 looks at a single issue item, while Table 4.2 looks at content more broadly.

In the summer of 2013, shortly after prominent journalists published articles about classified and controversial National Security Agency surveillance programs, the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project surveyed 1,801 Americans, asking about their position on this issue.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Pew inquired as to the degree of individuals' attitude concordance with specific members of their social circles. Table 4.1 outlines respondents' answers. Unsurprisingly, given the results of Alford et al.'s (2011) study, eighty-five percent of spouses have similar beliefs regarding government

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<sup>25</sup> According to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, "the results [from this survey]... are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International from August 7 to September 6, 2013, among a sample of 1,801 adults, age 18 or older. Telephone interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by landline and cell phone. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. For results based on Internet users (n=1,445), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points, and for those on Facebook or Twitter (n=1,076), plus or minus 3.3 points. In addition to sampling error, question wording, and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. A combination of landline and cellular random digital dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by the Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications... Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to compensate for sample designs and patterns of non-response that might bias results. A two-stage weighting procedure was used to weight this dual-frame sample" (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 38).

surveillance. Families and close friends demonstrate a similarly high degree of agreement. Interestingly, a majority of social networking site users say that members of their online social networks hold beliefs that accord with their own. Sixty percent of people on Facebook say that their Facebook friends have views that agree with their own, while only fifteen percent say they disagree with these friends. Likewise, half of Twitter users affirm that their followers hold beliefs that accord with their own, with only eighteen percent saying their followers maintain discordant beliefs. These findings show that social distance in part explains individuals' attitude concordance. The closer two people are socially – for example, spouses, family members, and close friends – the more likely they are to hold similar views on government and surveillance. Meanwhile, individuals who are slightly more distant socially, such as Facebook friends or Twitter followers, are less likely to hold the same beliefs. Overall, these results provide support for the negative camp's position that online social networks are largely homophilous. They accord specifically with the results of Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), Bon and Messing (2015), Alford et al. (2011), and Himelboim et al. (2013).



Table 4.1  
Members of Social Circles Agreeing on Government Surveillance, 2013

	Spouse or partner	Other family members	Close friends	Coworkers	Neighbors	People in your network on Facebook	People who follow you on Twitter
Mostly agree	53%	35%	36%	20%	17%	22%	18%
Somewhat agree	32%	34%	36%	29%	27%	38%	32%
Somewhat disagree	7%	11%	9%	9%	9%	10%	10%
Mostly disagree	4%	6%	4%	5%	6%	5%	8%
Doesn't apply	0%	0%	1%	19%	2%	1%	9%
Don't know	3%	13%	12%	15%	35%	20%	22%
	[1,017]	[1,801]	[1,801]	[1,015]	[1,801]	[960]	[223]

Dataset: Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Pew Research Center's Internet and American life Project, 2013

Logistic regression analysis by the Pew Internet and American Life Project<sup>26</sup> provides a more complete understanding of the people affirming attitude concordance on the issue of government surveillance. Their findings show that gender, age, education, marital status, and race do not have a serious impact on an individual's likelihood of

<sup>26</sup> The Pew Research Center says, "We report the odds based on a logistic regression. The outcome of a logistic regression tells us the probability that a person will do something based on the relationship to a series of predictor variables. For example, if half of the people in our sample are willing to speak out at a public meeting, but half are not, the probability of doing something is 50%, i.e. a 50-50 percent chance, the odds are equal, 1 to 1. The odds are a ratio of the probability that a person will do something over the probability that they will not. Let's say hypothetically, that 80% of the people in our sample were willing to speak with family about an issue, this means that 20% were not. The odds that they would speak out are  $.8/.2 = 4$ . That is to say, the odds that someone would speak with family are 4 to 1, or are four times higher, or are 4 times more likely to occur" (Hampton et al., 2014, p.5). Such analysis is used throughout their report and is relied upon in the study of demographic variables here.

perceiving opinion congruence on Facebook (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 30). However, interest in the topic made people twelve percent more likely to say that their Facebook friends held the same view as them, and holding a strong opinion on the subject made people twenty-two percent more likely to say the same (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 30). Cell phone use had the greatest impact, though. Cell phone users were ninety percent more likely to say that the views of their Facebook friends accorded with their own with regard to government surveillance (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 30). Therefore, the best predictors of attitude-concordance on Facebook are interest in a particular topic, strong opinion on that topic, and cell phone use.

It is important to note that the data in Table 4.1 look at a specific issue item, and does not represent people's experience on social networking sites holistically. A different question is needed to understand how these results fit into the overall social media experience, and the American Trends Panel offers this. Interestingly, the responses to the American Trends Panel's question on the ideological content that people encounter on Facebook in broad strokes agrees with the findings of the Pew Internet and American Life Project's 2013 study. Respondents to the first wave of the American Trends Panel were asked, "Thinking about the opinions you see people post about government and politics on Facebook, how often are they in line with your own views?" Table 4.2 below illustrates the responses of the individuals who use Facebook and also looks specifically at those who pay attention to Facebook posts. The data demonstrate that almost a quarter of the people in this latter category see information that accords with their political ideology always or most of the time. Meanwhile, about six in ten of the respondents who pay attention to Facebook posts say that they see content that align with their beliefs at

least some of the time. Finally, only thirteen percent of the people who pay attention to Facebook posts say they generally see attitude-discrepant information.

Table 4.2  
Facebook Users Seeing Political Content that Accords with Their Beliefs, 2014

	Facebook users	Pays attention to Facebook posts
Always or nearly all of the time	1%	2%
Most of the time	16%	21%
Some of the time	48%	62%
Not too often	10%	13%
I don't see any opinions	2%	3%
Does not pay attention	23%	---
	[2,153 respondents]	[1,627 respondents]

Dataset: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel Wave 1

Now, given that a majority of American Trends Panel participants say they see attitude-concordant political content on Facebook only “some of the time,” the results of the two surveys clearly illustrate slight divergence. Indeed, Table 4.2 seems to suggest that online social networks are at least somewhat heterogeneous. However, these discrepancies most likely result from the differences in the natures of the questions. The Pew Internet and American Life Project looks at a single issue, while the American Trends Panel consider political content generally. The results of these two queries, therefore, demonstrate that on single-issue items, people's views mostly align with those of the individuals in their online social circles. The sphere of “government and politics,” the term used by the American Trends Panel, encompasses many different issues, though, including government surveillance, immigration, and education, to name just a few.

Friends are quite capable of agreeing on almost every topic, while still diverging on a few others. That being the case, social networks can remain largely homophilous, while still exposing users to content that does not align with their beliefs. Table 4.1, thus, provides important context for the information depicted in Table 4.2. Together, they illustrate that online social circles are homophilous, though they retain the potential to expose social networking site users to attitude-discordant beliefs.

Further support for this hypothesis comes from two other questions asked during the first wave of the American Trends Panel. Respondents were queried, “Have you ever stopped talking to or being friends with someone because of something they said about government and politics?” Only twelve percent of participants said yes. Meanwhile, when asked, “Have you ever hidden, blocked, defriended, or stopped following someone on a social networking site because you did not agree with something that they posted about government and politics,” twenty-four percent said they had. The different responses to these two questions show that people are twice as likely to disengage from those of opposing ideologies online as they are in offline, face-to-face settings. Therefore, any attitude-discrepant opinions put forth on social media sites are likely to be ignored, if not blocked. Indeed, even if online social networks exhibit slight heterogeneity in the types of views expressed, they are unlikely to serve as the kind of public forum necessary for critical discussion of ideas. It is simply too easy for people to escape viewpoints with which they disagree.

Such results fit in generally with the idea put forth by the negative camp. The data presented in Table 4.1 show that there is little heterogeneity in online social networks, as few people say they disagree with their Facebook friends or Twitter followers on the

issue of government surveillance. Table 4.2 provides a more nuanced understanding, showing that people can still be exposed to attitude-discrepant views on social media. However, the proposition put forth to understand these two results maintains that online social networks remain largely homophilous, even if, given the large number of issue items encompassed by government and politics, people do not always see attitude-concordant content. This hypothesis is somewhat of a middle-of-the-road approach to the positions outlined by the negative and not negative camps. It holds that social networks do not need to be heterogeneous to expose people to a variety of ideas. However, this study's findings also show that individuals are twice as likely to disengage from someone online due to political disagreements as they are to do so offline. This statistic, combined with the idea about homophilous social networks, aligns this study's findings more closely with the negative camp than with the not negative one. The following section on online political deliberation will provide further support for the negative view.

Unfortunately, Internet users do not seem to think very highly of the online discussion atmosphere. The fourth wave of the American Trends Panel asked respondents to compare their online and offline experiences. Table 4.3 illustrates participants' answers. According to the data, almost seventy percent of the 2,849 people surveyed said they found the online community supportive. However, over ninety percent of these same individuals also said "the online environment allows people to be more critical of others." The contradictory nature of these answers is, perhaps, a result of the fact that online social networks are largely homophilous, allowing for supportive relationships, while the Internet community writ large contains many crosscutting opinions and widespread incivility. Given the vast majority of survey respondents' grim evaluation of the Web

environment, it seems unlikely that they will be willing to engage in online political debate.

Table 4.3  
Internet Users' Thoughts on the Atmosphere of the Online Environment, 2014

	Yes	No
The online environment allows people to be more anonymous	63%	36%
The online environment allows people to be more critical of others	92%	7%
The online environment allows people to be more supportive of others	68%	31%

Dataset: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel Wave 4

Indeed, responses to the Pew Internet and American Life Project's summer 2013 survey show people are not. In addition to their opinions on government surveillance, participants were asked how willing they would be to talk about the topic if it arose in various settings. Table 4.4 depicts people's answers to this query. Less than a quarter of individuals expressed an unwillingness to discuss the issue with family members, and only twenty-eight percent said they would not want to talk about it with friends. Meanwhile, fifty-six percent of Twitter users said they would be unwilling to join the conversation if it came up on that site, and fifty-seven percent of Facebook users said the same in regard to that forum. Clearly, people feel uncomfortable engaging in political debate online.

Table 4.4  
Willingness to Discuss Government Surveillance Programs in Specific Settings, 2013

	At a community meeting	At work	At a restaurant with friends	At a family dinner	On Facebook	On Twitter
Very willing	26%	26%	32%	39%	15%	14%
Somewhat willing	39%	38%	38%	34%	26%	26%
Somewhat unwilling	16%	15%	14%	12%	23%	18%
Very unwilling	16%	18%	14%	12%	34%	38%
	[1,801]	[1,105]	[1,801]	[1,801]	[960]	[223]

Dataset: Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Pew Research Center's Internet and American life Project, 2013

The Pew Research Center's logistic regressions consider the demographic factors that affect people's willingness to engage in debate online. Age and education were not seriously impactful (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 28). That said, women were twenty percent less likely to engage in a discussion on government surveillance on Facebook, while African Americans were twenty percent more likely to do so (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 28). Knowledge of the subject made people over thirty percent more likely to jump into a political debate on Facebook and, incredibly, a strong opinion on government surveillance made people one hundred forty percent more likely to join a Facebook conversation on the subject (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 28). Again, cell phone use had an important effect. Individuals with mobile phones were fifty percent more likely to engage in a political debate on Facebook (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 28).

One of the most interesting factors affecting the likelihood that people will engage in public deliberation on Facebook was opinion congruence with members of their social circles. Agreeing with one's family members made a person twelve percent less likely to jump into a Facebook debate on the subject, and opinion congruence with friends made people almost thirty-five percent less likely to engage in such discussion (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 29). Meanwhile, agreeing with coworkers and neighbors made people about twenty percent more likely to join a discussion on Facebook about government surveillance (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 29). Additionally, opinion congruence with Facebook friends made individuals ninety percent more likely to engage in such debates on Facebook, and opinion congruence with Twitter followers made people almost seventy percent more likely to do so (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 29).

Such results again hint at the importance of social distance. Here, attitude concordance with people who are farther socially actually makes people more likely to engage in Facebook debates on government surveillance. Opinion congruence with one's family or friends made a person less likely to engage in political deliberation on Facebook. Agreement with people who are slightly further socially – coworkers and neighbors – made someone slightly more likely to engage in debate on Facebook. Meanwhile, attitude concordance with people on Facebook and Twitter made people the most likely to participate in such discussions on Facebook. However, such results are actually more illustrative of the fact that people seem to want to debate issues only if their fellow discussants agree with them. For instance, perceived opinion congruence among coworkers made people almost two hundred percent more likely to engage in political debate at work, while agreement among family members made respondents ninety



percent more willing to discuss government surveillance at family dinner. These findings, therefore, suggest that people are less willing to debate complex and important issues if such conversations are likely to expose them to attitude-discrepant views. They provide evidence for the idea that individuals only want to engage in democratic deliberation if all of the participants agree.

Unwillingness to engage with others may also be related to the general incivility exhibited during political deliberations online, as shown in Table 4.3. Regardless of the reason, though, such findings show that the Internet is a poor forum for public debate. Indeed, it fails to serve as a marketplace of ideas or general public sphere. Instead, the responses to the survey questions examined here demonstrate that Internet users remain cloistered within homophilous social networks, where only attitude-concordant opinions receive attention. Such tendencies limit exposure to the variety of news information available online and contribute to political polarization in the United States. These findings again support the negative camp's position of the effect of online news consumption on political polarization and democratic deliberation. It provides further evidence for homophilous social circles online and suggests that fruitful democratic deliberation does not really take place on the Internet, positions both represented by the negative camp.

### *Conclusion*

The preceding chapter examined the actual impact of the Internet and online news consumption on political life. It examined the scholarly debate on partisan polarization in the United States, and concluded that Americans are becoming increasingly bimodally distributed with regard to their political ideologies. It then considered the different

academic positions on the effect that the Internet and online news consumption has had on this polarization. The preponderance of evidence seemed to rest with the negative camp, and the survey data considered by this study further supported this viewpoint. The data here found that online social networks are largely homophilous and that people are loath to engage in real democratic deliberation on the Internet. The following chapter will conclude with some thoughts for future research.

### *Chapter 5: Conclusion*

This study has attempted to show the effect of the Internet and online news consumption on American politics. It began with a brief introduction on news consumption in the United States over the past few decades. Chapter 2 then moved into a discussion of the people that use the Internet and the types of websites that they access. Using data from the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption Survey, this section considered the characteristics that define Internet users and, more specifically, social networking site users. These individuals are the ones liable to be affected by online news consumption. Following this discussion, Chapter 3 examined the role of gatekeepers in influencing Internet users' patterns of news consumption. It considered both technological and human factors, turning first to search engines, then to news professionals themselves, before finally looking at the role of average individuals who operate as opinion leaders. These gatekeepers were shown to influence the consumption patterns of Internet users. Finally, in Chapter 4, this paper examined exactly what impact the Web and online news consumption has had. It considered both democratic deliberation and political polarization. Data from the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel and Internet and American Life Project helped ultimately show that the Internet has enabled ideological segregation and contributed to the decline in rational political debate.

This paper leaves open many avenues for future research. For one, political scientists may try to update the way in which Web traffic is studied. A better method for tracking Internet use will certainly help future studies of online news consumption. Additionally, political scientists may attempt to explain what caused Internet use to

increase so dramatically from 2008 to 2010, as evidenced in Table 2.1. Future studies may also seek to explain discrepancies in patterns of Web use among people representing different census regions, races, income brackets, educational achievement, and age. Intuitive answers can, of course, be provided, but future analysis may attempt to provide definitive answers. Another potentially fruitful avenue of study is a look at the demographics of social networking site use. This paper could only describe the types of people using social media. It was unable to definitively account for differences in gender, race, income bracket, partisanship, education levels, and age. Future research should also be brought to bear on the extent to which people engage with attitude-discrepant information. Do they read such news in order to become more informed? Or are they primarily seeking to criticize the other side? Additionally, political scientists should attempt to show whether segregation of online news consumption definitively causes political polarization or is merely a contributing factor.

This study looked at the issue of government surveillance as a case study of opinion congruence and willingness to engage in political debate online. However, government surveillance represents just one issue. Future research should attempt to determine whether government surveillance is a unique subject or whether other topics manifest similar survey responses with respect to attitude agreement and willingness to participate in discussion. Do issues such as immigration reform, abortion, income inequality, and the like evidence the same results? Such study would help show whether the analysis here is actually generalizable.

Finally, this paper hinted at two reasons for why individuals choose not to engage in political deliberation online. One is the hostile environment exhibited on the Internet.

The other is people's general unwillingness to discuss issues with people who do not share their views. This study did not attempt to determine which reason is more impactful with respect to influencing users' decision to join political conversations online, but future research should attempt to do so.

The ideas and questions outlined here are by no means exhaustive. They are merely a stepping-stone for future studies, which may help political scientists better understand American society and the digital age. Unsurprisingly, this paper raises many more questions than it answers, and any failings are the author's own.

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